

LEARNING TO LEAD,  
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](http://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 15

## Personal and Professional Identities, Belonging, and Change

### The Process of Becoming

Sheila Carter-Tod, *University of Denver*

When I began thinking about how I would approach this chapter, I considered both the goals of the larger project and how what I may have to say might fit into these goals. In the introduction, the course is described as “intended to highlight its distinctive approach—specifically, its focus on how people learn to lead in higher education.... These leaders ... are, to be sure, experts. Their thinking is grounded in learning theory and research and in their own experiences.” I made several attempts at creating a chapter that would somehow integrate my identities and experiences tracing how I, as a leader, have moved towards “expertise.”

While I made multiple attempts to begin, I felt a niggling sense of inadequacy—as if I did not belong or could not be viewed as any sort of expert. It took me multiple stretches of starts, discards, and restarts to squelch my sense of self-doubt. This feeling of not belonging, or self-doubt, often called imposter syndrome (IS) or imposter phenomenon (IP), has stifled me throughout my leadership journey, as it has for many African American women in higher education, in all levels of leadership, and across all disciplines. Huecker et al. (2023) describe what I was feeling as an “essentially pathognomonic characteristic of imposter syndrome ... that occurs when individuals with IS face an assignment, obstacle, duty, or other achievement-related tasks. In those with IS, the response to this achievement-related task is generalizable into two broad categories:

over-preparation and procrastination” (Huecker et al. 2023, under “Imposter Cycle”). For me this began with an unprecedented dive into leadership and learning theory—reading and amassing large quantities of notes and ideas that I saw as essential to trying to consider and frame my leadership. Next, I moved into a prolonged stage of procrastination. I was surprised that I was so impacted by my feelings of not belonging to “a group of experts.” I thought that I had moved beyond the crippling hold that feeling like an imposter had on my actions and writing, but here I was again. I finally found that it was only through writing through my fears of not belonging, that I freed up my mind to write about its impact. It may seem a bit contradictory that even while having these feelings of not belonging, I have held a host of leadership positions—from university leadership like director of composition, director of curriculum and pedagogical development, director/liaison for an \$18 million university gift to professional leadership roles in the National Council of Teachers of English, College Composition and Communications, and the Council of Writing Program Administrators. When asked to accept each position, my choice to accept them was grounded in my deep desire to create and maintain greater access to educational opportunities. Before moving into my leadership journey, it is important to explain why I chose higher education as a career.

My values, my work, and my life are grounded in a clear sense of the power of language and the impact of how that knowledge (or lack of knowledge) impacts individuals and, by extension, systems. I saw brilliant people struggle with job security, housing issues because of contracts that they did not understand, and many other language-based complexities. For example, when a company decided to change procedural platforms and provided no training, my cousin, who was a data entry worker, was “let go” for inefficiencies in her data entry pace. This pacing issue was because she had to spend a great deal of time deciphering what she could of the online information that she had been given, essentially teaching herself the new platform in order to do her job. While this may be seen as one unfortunate situation, I saw many such situations occurring—from apartments lost because

of overly complicated lease language to misleading language in work-based contracts.

I think that my keen understanding of language came from a deeply learned commitment to education. As early as I can remember, my parents (and those of all the children in my community) taught us that education is fundamental to success. They emphasized that understanding language and how it worked was a sign of intelligence and upward mobility. Yet, I saw very few of my near peers going on to college or university. The host of barriers that prevented them from attending post-secondary school ranged from money to academic preparedness to an understanding of how the systems of higher education work. As I grew up, I learned about so many of the obstacles that led to my community's disproportionate denied access to postsecondary education. Access to education allowed you to better understand how to interpret documents and to know what to do with them. Access to education meant the possibility of jobs that paid enough to break cycles of poverty. My love of language meant that my way of creating venues of access would be through language and literacies.

I lead with this “confessional” to illustrate that even as a later career, first-generation, African American, female professor who has been an administrator for most of my academic career, I still face the challenges of becoming. I have and am still learning to lead using my identities as assets and not deficits. I also lead with this story because I believe that with my story, I am welcoming all into my leadership process—even those who don't feel that they belong in these roles. In welcoming all, it is my goal to show that belonging, learning, and change have been integral parts of my ongoing process of becoming and being a leader.

Learning to lead is a process or a series of processes. It is often based on our personalities that we seek opportunities to lead. Additionally, schooling and/or educational processes help us develop who we are as leaders. A key part of learning to lead is reconciling who we are with what we know (about leadership). This learning process is generative, revision-based, recursive, and reflective—words frequently associated with the writing process, but equally important here. What follows is

my tracing my own learning to lead process(es) through a series of stories and an exploration of theory.

### **Traits and Situational Leadership**

There has been a long debate in leadership theory about the role of personality traits in leaders. Although currently summarily dismissed, in the mid-nineteenth century, research on leadership focused on the innate characteristics of leaders and on identifying the personality traits and other qualities of effective leaders (Benmira and Agboola 2020, 3). Popularized by Thomas Carlyle, the “Great Man” theory of leadership claimed that great leaders are born with specific innate traits that make them leaders. The “Great Man” theory later was disrupted by behavioral theories of leadership that argued that “leaders can be born or made” (Benmira and Agboola 2020, 3). While these theories have been dismissed, I can see some traces of my experience in them. Using these earlier and problematic ideas to frame my earliest experience of leadership, I would say that my earliest memories of leading were based on my personality. I was born with specific traits and shaped by environments that made me want to lead.

*Recess time in elementary school, students would pour out of the classroom, racing towards equipment or locations to best utilize the fastest 30–45 minutes of the day. The playground was chaos. By the time we somehow got around to what we had been planning to do, most of the time had passed. Frustrated with this chaos and lack of efficiency and fueled by my need to prove my ability to beat almost everyone in short races, I organized relay races on a regular basis. We would leave the classroom for recess, and people would consult with me as to whose relay team they would be on, and which teams were racing in what order. People listened to me and did what I asked/told them—they willingly followed my lead.*

Through this story, I can't help but identify that there was something "in me" that has always propelled me to take on leadership roles. At this time, my environment was also a factor that shaped me as a leader. I was bussed to an all-white school several neighborhoods away from where I lived. My proficiency at organizing and leading during recess shaped how I navigated an environment in which I was often being judged or ignored because I was different. This elementary school experience had provided some of my first encounters with attitudes of rejection and bias focused on me specifically or my actions. Yet somehow, I believed that on that playground, my race, lower socioeconomic status, and the stigmatization of being one of the bussed kids, did not hinder my ability to lead. My speed and knowledge of the speed of others allowed me to be considered enough of an expert to lead, allowing me to create a space where I belonged. At the time, it may have been the confidence that comes with youth: my naivety of believing that "I could show them."

While I would identify personality traits as key to my earliest experiences with leadership, it was not personality traits alone that furthered my process of becoming a leader. As I describe above, my leadership journey has been a series of processes. Considering my adaptive strategies to account for the context of my environment, the theoretical framework of situational leadership serves best to describe my next memory of leading. Northouse (2019) describes situational leadership as based on the ways in which "different situations demand different kinds of leadership... To be an effective leader requires that a person adapt his or her style to the demands of different situations... To determine what is needed in a particular situation, leaders must evaluate [their] followers" (95).

*It was my junior year of high school, and, after witnessing what seemed to be a less than adequate treatment of our sophomore year's activities—the class officers did not plan any activities—I decided to run for class government. In this environment, my race and socioeconomic status did influence the school's sense of my consideration as a leader. Before my interests in running, only wealthy white students had held such positions. I knew that*

*disrupting this hierarchy would be a challenge. What I had going for me was that I was involved in many school activities, allowing me to cross multiple school groups with ease. In the past, there had been limited knowledge of when the voting was to take place and where to vote, so I realized that my winning would need to be based on getting as many people as possible to vote from the groups that traditionally did not vote. I also knew that there were certain kinds of stickers that transcended groups, and that people liked to wear. I created stickers, buttons and flyers with my name and the office that I was running for (vice president), but instead of a slogan, I included information of where and when to vote. Having watched past elections and how various students catered to those they knew would vote for them, I knew that high school interactions of popularity, cross group relationships, and creating access to a larger group of voters were all situations that were going to be necessary to disrupt the years of "tradition" and make the changes that I wanted to see for our junior year. Winning would be situation-based and collaborative, based on needs-based decision making—finding out what students wanted and needed from their junior experience since so little had been done in our sophomore year. My strategy worked, to the dismay of those running and teachers (who had assumed the same students would win and had already planned to work with them). Based on the votes gained by my analysis of the situation, I won by a landslide.*

The skills, behaviors, and practices that I used for analysis are what I would now characterize as transferable strategies from one leadership situation to another.

Unlike what I saw as leading because it was "just part of personality," my secondary and postsecondary understanding of leadership helped me to learn that a leader is not only a product of the environment from which they come, but also that leaders can disrupt or change the

environments/situations in which they lead. *Listening to those who were invested* in school activities but did not feel a part of the formal school governance process, *adjusting and improving processes to ensure success*, and *spending time collaborating with all groups to brainstorm and create activities that people were interested in investing time and energy into* were skills, behaviors, and practices that I still use in all aspects of my leadership. Most recently, in my current leadership role, this has taken the form of listening sessions (both one-on-one and in small groups); adjusting days, times, and formats for faculty meetings and faculty gatherings so that they worked for a range of schedules and life situations; and collaboratively creating program initiatives based on the interests and specializations of those in the program.

When we use theoretical frameworks to explore any stories, there are aspects of each story that could be explained by multiple theories. For example, situational theory could explain the environment that made me into the playground leader as the high school situation could also be explained based on specific traits—innate and learned. In other words, much like the process(es) of becoming a leader, applying theoretical leadership models to explain stories can be recursive and easily revised by re-looking at or re-envisioning the content. While I focus my analysis here in one way, the same theoretical model with a slightly different focus on the same situations could lead to further and other insights. It is important to note that there are no “neutral” models of leadership. Each model or theory brings some things into focus and leaves others out. Additionally, the ways in which we frame leadership have implications, including overt or covert implications of who “belongs” and can or should assume or perform certain identities.

This situational leadership continued as I took on leadership roles throughout college—in social and religious groups. I continued to rely on aspects innate to my personality while also continuing to shape and be shaped by the situational environments in which I led. But I needed more. To use only what I had at hand and what I problem-solved in situations limited my ability to lead. Additionally, as I continued in higher education environments, I felt more and more like an imposter. I did not

encounter other faculty who looked like me or other administrators who looked like me. The leadership models, as mentioned above, were not “neutral.” I still wanted to be a leader, and I still sought leadership opportunities that allowed me to lead in ways in which I felt effective—creating environments in which I and others belonged. I was changing, personally and intellectually, and the more I learned, the more I realized how much I didn’t know. In my postsecondary education, I decided that I wanted to expand my understanding of leadership academically.

In undergraduate/graduate school and in my earlier career, my becoming a leader was heavily influenced by two people through their content and example. I met the first of these two people as a graduate student in curriculum and instruction. My educational psychology course and professor taught me about learning theories, helping me to better make connections between the role of learning theory and becoming a leader. The second, a department chair I met as an early-career academic, taught me how someone who looked like me could lead and make change in authentic ways.

### Learning and Leadership

Many theories of learning also parallel theories of leadership development because “[l]eadership is closely connected with the concept of change, and change, in turn, . . . is at the essence of the learning process” (Brown and Posner 2001). When exploring my continued process(es) of becoming a leader and leading, I can best explain and illustrate these connections with two more narratives.

*In my educational psychology course, Dr. Bruton taught me about learning theory both through direct and indirect instruction. (The names in these narratives are pseudonyms.) After teaching us about theories of educational/learning psychology through direct instruction and through connections between and across units, we were given multiple choice tests. When he returned the tests, we were allowed to discuss why we had chosen one specific answer over another and why we considered*

*our choice correct. If we had compelling content-based reasons for justifying our choice, we were given credit for that question. For example, if had chosen both behaviorism and social constructivism best fit the example that we were given, I could argue that behavior is socially constructed and thus was as suitable an answer as what he had intended for us to choose, which was constructivism.*

This experience was influential in my development as a leader because it taught me about perceptions of assessment, learning, and leading. While the exam was the assessment for the unit, it was only part of our learning processes. The class period that followed the assessment was as much a part of the overall instructional environment as was the notes or case studies we reviewed in class. What he was doing through his instruction clarified the content of each educational learning theory and exemplified them. From him, I learned that educational learning theories could be combined and enacted collectively for effective instruction.

In the table below, I illustrate the connections that I make in this reflective analysis by describing what I learned about theories of learning and their connections and influences on my understanding of leadership.

Table 15.1. Learning Theories and Leadership Practices.

Learning Theory	Definition	Leadership Practices
Behaviorism	Learning is shaped by processes of behavior modifications—which often includes direct instruction and involves social learning theory.	If I am expecting someone to do something, I must make sure that my expectations are clear and provide feedback to help them shape their carrying out of those duties.

Learning Theory	Definition	Leadership Practices
Cognitivism	Learning is focused on the internal processes surrounding information and memory—which emphasize connections between past ideas and new ones.	I need to make sure that as a leader, I am clear in connecting the activities to the larger goals of the unit. I also need to provide space for discussion of how those in my unit are encountering and carrying out what I have asked them to do. And finally, I need to provide an environment that encourages transparencies in processing processes.
Humanism	Leading emphasizes the importance of personal growth, self-actualization, and whole-person development—which emphasizes the unique capabilities of each learner rather than the method or materials.	As a leader, I need to be connected enough with those I lead to understand how I can support their individual growth holistically.

Learning Theory	Definition	Leadership Practices
Constructivism	Learning builds upon previous experience and understanding—which promotes active, hands-on experimentation with interactive materials, open-ended questions which encourages students to think critically and form questions and solutions in real time.	As a leader, I must create time for and acknowledge questioning, attempts, and failures as opportunities for growth.

Theories of learning have shaped all my instructional practices and are directly connected to my continued development as a leader. But while the influence of Dr. Bruton's instruction and instructional practices played such a positive role in my understanding of leadership, it would be some time before I encountered leaders that inspired me to further consider myself a leader or leadership as a real path for my future. It may seem odd through my sequence of stories, but as I saw it, I took on leadership roles as problem-solving endeavors, while not formally seeing myself as a leader. I was in a doctoral program with leaders who were part of a concentration in leadership and was working at a university with a range of leaders. However, in both cases, their leadership styles were not anything that I wanted to replicate. They often seemed to have taken on bureaucratic, top-down, overly authoritative leadership styles that were not consistent with their personalities. For this time, and sometime after, my desire to lead was pushed back to the periphery of my vision

while I focused on the immediacy of completing my PhD and finding a job in my area of study. This time of new focused energy, coupled with a lack of encounters with anyone else who looked like me, led to the strongest sense of not being good enough for or really fitting into higher education—the most intensive grounding and forging of what I earlier described as imposter syndrome/phenomenon, a term first described by Suzanne Imes and Pauline Rose Clance as an observation first among successful women and other marginalized groups (Huecker et al. 2023, n.p.).

A humanistic perspective of learning theory is one that emphasizes the importance of growth, self-actualization, and whole person development, yet that was an aspect of becoming a leader that was lost for me at this time. The models that I studied and the professors who taught me seemed to be shaped more by the theorizing of leading than by the pursuit and practice of authentically leading. The lack of visible representation of leaders of color seemed to reinforce my inadequacies for even being in higher education, let alone considering being a leader in this environment. While I was able to reject, fight against, or even try not to let what I was encountering shape my career decisions of where I did and did not belong, the institutional nature of imposter syndrome/phenomenon in higher education is much more powerful than the strength or convictions of the individual. Based on their case study research on intersectionality and imposter syndrome/phenomenon, Hewertson and Tissa (2022) further articulate the role of higher education on BIPOC scholars' feelings of not belonging when they conclude the following:

Black women are more likely to suffer from the imposter phenomenon which affects their progress at university. Allen and Joseph (2018) explored the educational and social experiences of Black women in the academy and found that the white male perspective dominates academia. When women of colour challenge this notion, they are not seen as the typical 'scholar in training' and

they end up having to redefine what it means to be an academic. They are in a constant fight to prove that they belong in the academy (Brunner and Peyton Caire 2000). The culture of academia can be isolating, and they are regularly battling with exclusionary practices and insensitive comments. (Hewertson and Tissa 2022, 23)

What was valued or rewarded as leadership qualities and practices seemed problematic to me. Professors were promoted by their abundance of research or by the research money they brought into the university, not by any leadership qualities they exhibited. In hindsight, I was learning about leadership by watching negative examples; I learned that I wanted to lead in opposition to what I saw as negative models, and I continued to search out what I considered positive models.

*This perspective of higher educational leadership changed with one exceptionally positive model of leader—Professor Stone. Professor Stone had been an associate dean before taking on the role of department chair for our department of English. She was the first African American English department chair at Virginia Tech, and she was a force of nature. I was aware of her as a leader because I had interviewed her as part of one of my courses in higher education leadership while she was a dean in the college. At the time that I interviewed her, she told me that you go into administration because you have a vision for change, and/or want to accomplish something. She went on to say that once you have accomplished what you set out to do, get out—otherwise much of your work is spent on working to keep your administrative post. While she was my department chair, I watched her navigate her role within a larger institutional setting to truly forward change. She showed me what it looked like to collaboratively create a shared vision, choosing the right individuals to forward that vision and trusting them to accomplish their part with an eye to the whole. From her, I witnessed and learned lessons*

*about finding ways to really listen and bring in all voices for input, and she showed me how a certain level of transparency is key to navigating relationships in multiple directions—with upper administration, with colleagues within program, and with colleagues across campus. And finally, she showed me how to consider my personal and rhetorical positionality when working with senior leaders and institutional structures. For example, she was able to secure funding for departmental inclusion initiatives by connecting them to both the university strategic plan and core curriculum requirements—illustrating how focused efforts need to be connected to larger university-based efforts and funding lines. Additionally, with an eye towards establishing the English department as research-grounded and an integral part of graduate efforts, she convened committees that were successful in developing two departmental graduate programs (an MFA and a PhD). Watching her lead, encourage, advocate for, and support individuals, committees, and initiatives illustrated that a good leader could incorporate the best of leadership theory with a clear sense of who she was and what she valued. She found a way to reconcile who she was as a person (an author, an artist, a creative writing teacher, an activist, and an advocate for women and minorities) with her leading and managing the work of a department of roughly 100 people.*

While Professor Stone inspired me, she still left me with the question of how I could create a leadership style based on my own personality and values, pulling together what I had learned about leadership and who I was as an individual. This understanding moved beyond the limits of the “great person” approach to an intertwining of personality, values, situation and environment. I was not her, and outside of her example, different models of higher education leadership seemed somewhat contradictory to my values. From my experience, those who worked to further goals of equity and inclusion were undervalued.

Those who exemplified leadership in instructional or student-based realms were deemed unscholarly and were not promoted to tenure and subsequently selected for leadership roles. Leadership was given to those who were proficient researchers—publishing and bringing in grant money—but who had not developed the skills to navigate the intricacies of departmental or university operations. Except for Professor Stone, all that I had learned and valued about what it means to lead (situational analysis and needs assessment skills, communication skills, and collaborative and problem-solving skills) were not valued in the leaders being chosen.

Although I did take on administrative roles, including director of the writing program and director of curricular and pedagogical development, and was even elected to leadership roles in professional organizations of my discipline, I was steadily becoming more disillusioned with how what I was doing furthered my values and frustrated with butting up against direct and indirect questioning of my credentials or even my place in these leadership roles. By mid-career, I had stepped away from leadership/administrative roles completely. I saw no way of committing to what I valued while enacting the expectations and limitations of leaders in higher education. I struggled with how I could create opportunities for access or even develop programs and individuals with business-based models being misapplied to educational environments. As I mentioned earlier, I originally went into higher education because I believed in creating access to education for more people who looked like me. I chose my focus—linguistic equity and justice—because of the role language plays in all aspects of access and equity. Having been bussed to school for most of my childhood and then attending predominantly white institutions (PWIs) for undergraduate and graduate school, I was keenly aware of how language usage could provide or deny opportunities and how those accesses or denials shaped career and life trajectories. Becoming a Writing Studies professor was a way to help students and other scholars understand the ways in which language and social justice are directly connected. My focus on race, language, and injustices was and is guided by such language and linguistic scholars like Alim, Rickford, and Ball (2016), whose work has been critical in exploring and explaining the

central role that language plays in shaping our ideas about race and vice versa; John Baugh (2018), whose research coined the phrase “linguistic profiling” based on experimental studies of housing discrimination and expanded upon those findings to promote equity in education, employment, medicine, and the law; William Labov (1972 and 1982), whose work pioneered an approach to investigating the relationship between language and society, eventually developing a field that has come to be known as “variationist sociolinguistics”; and Makoni et al. (2003), whose book recognizes and formalizes the existence of a “Black Linguistic Perspective,” highlighting contributions of Black language researchers in the field of linguistics (see also Smitherman 1977, 2000). My teaching, research, and service were all acts of social justice, yet the same efforts were not easily reconciled with leadership in higher education.

In my own process(es) of becoming, I continued struggling to find ways to reconcile how my personality and values could address the systemic injustices of institutional practices within higher education, yet I am now better able to challenge some of these injustices by enacting agency-based approaches as an intersectional leader focused on addressing these injustices.

### Enacted Agency-Based Leadership

*Four years ago, I sat on a Zoom screen with 15–20 folks who lived twenty-six hours from where I was living at the time. While still not claiming expertise, I saw the potential in this place to become the leader I could imagine. In this job talk, I described myself as a relational leader (an individually centered, purposeful, approach to working with others that cultivates inclusivity, empowerment, ethical behavior, and collaboration) with a social justice focus in all that I do. I was very transparent in my articulation of who I am as a leader and what my values are. When asked what that meant, I was able to share why I had gone into higher education and Writing Studies and how*

*I saw the discipline more broadly and this institution specifically, poised to reimagine what is possible. What had attracted me to this position was the work that the faculty/program had done related to community outreach, linguistic justice, and leading the campus in multiple equity-based initiatives.*

*I was ready to enter this space at a different stage in my process than I had ever been—a more reconciled stage. I was ready to continue my learning while moving forward on a social justice-based, transformation-ally-focused model of leadership.*

I am not sure if it was navigating the challenges of COVID-19 or the social and racial unrest of the country before and after COVID-19, but I became acutely aware of changes that needed to be made and wanting to be in positions to make those changes. I wanted to lead these changes because I felt that I had the knowledge and experience to make a difference. I began to believe that social justice in higher education leadership could be possible or at least I was willing to try to reconcile these concepts. By this time, I had been in higher education for over thirty years, and I had not been in an administrative role for over six years. Having worked as the director of composition at the departmental level, diversity fellow at the college level, and the director of curricular and pedagogical development at the university level, I had a greater insight into the ways in which change comes about in higher educational environments.

As someone with imposter phenomenon, I had to learn systems of higher education from a position outside the tradition of “how things were done.” I had both experience and insight to enact the change needed at this time in the history of higher education. This was a time that my insights and experiences could indeed redefine and shape the future of higher education—more than ever before. With this almost “calling” in mind, I now serve as the Executive Director of the University Writing Program at the University of Denver. In this version of myself as a leader, I brought with me the younger leader who felt the need to make some order out of the chaos. I drew upon Professor Stone’s advice of having a

vision for something that I wanted to change, and an ability to reconcile my understanding of teaching and learning with leading. After reading more about BIPOC leaders and watching broader ranges of how people became leaders, I developed a new and greater understanding of enacted agency-based social justice. While I could not articulate it at the time, I have subsequently found that Valarie Kaur’s model of social justice has provided me with a continued foundation for articulating the enacted leadership processes that I am attempting to inhabit. In her *See No Stranger*, she has a chapter titled “reimagine” in which she says “[a]ny social harm can be traced to institutions that produce it, authorize it, or otherwise profit from it. To undo the injustice, we have to imagine new institutions—and step in to lead them” (2020, 172). My process of enacted agency-based leading is founded on reimagining what can be and building towards it.

Because I am still learning and continuing my process(es) of becoming a better leader, I can hardly say that I am an expert. Perhaps that is part of the process of being an expert. But what I have learned through observation, learning, and experience is that any leadership position presents an opportunity to further processes of becoming—navigating and negotiating personal and professional identities, figuring out how and where you belong, and seeking to enact meaningful change based on your values and the context in which you lead.

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