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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 4

Academic Leadership Beyond the Academy

Heidi Estrem, *Idaho State Board of Education*

When I moved from my campus office to the government building that houses the Idaho State Board of Education just over a mile away, I was crossing more than a physical distance. This transition from twenty-two years as a faculty member and writing program leader at a university to the Associate Academic Officer position at a state governing agency would reshape and is reshaping my understanding of what it means to lead in academic contexts. I had spent my career working to thoughtfully advocate for first-year college students through writing program leadership. I was now embracing the opportunity to advocate for all college students in Idaho through work that took me further away from the classroom and closer to the legislative environment.

I initially hesitated to apply for the position. The prospect of year-round, in-person work in a government building seemed constraining compared to the flexibility of faculty life. I loved my work on campus; I had thoughtful, dedicated colleagues, and students continued to amaze and energize me. I enjoyed leading initiatives in first-year writing because our work together was deeply collaborative, and it directly impacted students. Yet I was also thirsty for a new challenge and felt a little too settled in my role. In a state office, I would be physically removed from a university, but I would have the opportunity to serve on behalf of students from an entirely new perspective.

Elaine Maimon, initially a writing scholar and later a university president, writes that presidential leadership must be “transformative rather than transactional” (2018, xvii). Transformative leadership, she writes, “is about shared ownership—buy-in, rather than buying . . . transformative leadership is more focused on relationships, more open to multiple interpretations, more adaptable to new situations . . . and capable of paying attention to both the goals themselves and to the process for achieving those goals” (Maimon 2018, 5). adrienne maree brown encourages leaders to focus on love, noting that “the strength of our movement is in the strength of our relationships, which could only be measured by their depth” (2017, 10). This chapter traces echoes of these ideas about transformational, relational leadership through exploring what learning to lead in an educational setting beyond a university looks like. I reflect on what the leadership approaches developed in college writing program leadership have taught me for my work now in broader educational leadership roles.

Learning Through Writing Program Leadership

Early in a PhD program in Composition and Rhetoric, influenced by texts like Elspeth Stuckey’s *The Violence of Literacy* (1990) and Paolo Freire’s *Pedagogy of Hope* (1990), I realized that there was positive, impactful work to do in the academy beyond the individual classroom or research project. I was drawn to positions where I could influence and improve institutional policies and pedagogies that negatively impact students. I am not a solitary scholar; I thrive most when I’m talking and learning with others. I like to look for “the conversation in the room that only these people at this moment can have,” to sharpen ideas through collaboration, to shape large-scale work (such as a college writing curriculum) through small-scale discussions (brown 2017, 41).

Fortuitously, I was hired into an unexpected collaboration in my first academic position as an assistant professor and assistant writing program director at Eastern Michigan University. While only one position was advertised, they were able to hire two of us, and Linda Adler-Kassner joined as the writing program director at the same time.

Our tenure-track faculty positions included reassigned time (from teaching or research) for writing program leadership, and we dove in. I brought with me a hopeful, asset-based view of students from my graduate school experience, and that continued to deepen through extended collaborative leadership work with Linda. In the US context, a “first-year writing program” refers to courses that students complete as part of their general education requirements. In some US institutions, such as the one where Linda and I worked together, these programs are directed by tenure-line (or full-time) faculty. However, because of the large number of courses included in the programs—courses required of many first-year students in large universities—they are often taught by a combination of contingent faculty, tenure-line faculty, and/or graduate students.

Changing the curriculum of a writing program without any additional funding and while mostly relying on the goodwill of everyone involved requires that leaders have the willingness to listen and learn from instructors with widely differing backgrounds and commitments, to look for the conversation that only the “people in the room at that moment” can have. I have good memories of hosting pizza-and-curriculum afternoons in Linda’s backyard, encouraging interested instructors to engage and share how and why they taught as they did. Those informal meetings led us to drafting possible approaches, sharing them back with the instructors, listening to input, and drafting again. Linda and I spent hours over tabouli talking and writing and rewriting plans. We encouraged instructors to pilot new approaches and share their results. It was uneven and challenging work, and it engaged me with a wider variety of instructors than I’d previously encountered. Through co-leading that program, I learned that people need multiple ways to be included and engaged; instructors could live with compromise if they also felt truly heard. I also experienced how leading a writing program is a blend of thoughtful cheerleading, pragmatic compromises (we did not implement a perfect curriculum), and joy.

I moved to Boise State in 2006, entering as the director of the first-year writing program and a faculty member in the English Department, a position I held until 2022. I followed a mostly traditional tenure-track

academic journey there, earning tenure; researching issues that mattered to me; leading a writing program that was directly connected with student belonging, learning, and retention initiatives; and serving in my university and in national professional organizations. Two leadership projects at the university were especially transformative for me: our statewide work on writing placement and a curriculum project within our program.

Writing placement—how students’ capacities are assessed and then how students are “placed” into a first-year writing program—is often represented by a few lines, or maybe a chart, in a university’s policy catalog. However, placement can have a substantial impact on students, requiring them to take courses that do not count toward their degree, for example. At Eastern Michigan, I had collaborated with colleagues from across campus to change and improve our writing placement processes, and so when I arrived at Boise State, I saw that the then-required approach, which used standardized tests only, was negatively impacting some students.

First-year writing courses, due to their particular location within a US university as a set of general education courses that are often also graduation requirements, are among those most regularly transferred to other institutions. These courses have a rich disciplinary history of their own and yet are often subject to state placement and credit policies (see Estrem, shepherd, and Duman 2014). This complicated location means that any change in first-year writing requires input and buy-in—not just from the instructors teaching the courses, but also often from external communities like the registrar’s office, the provost, advising, and even other community colleges or universities in the area.

Because we were bound by state policy, before I could change writing placement at my institution, I quickly realized that we would also need to engage in this work at the other seven public postsecondary institutions in Idaho. At that time, the English Department chairs and writing program leaders from each institution were meeting annually to discuss various issues of concern. Our conversations shifted from lament into collective action; we worked hard to listen to each other and

compromise while also developing a common writing framework that could work for open-access community colleges and research universities (Estrem, shepherd, and Sturman 2018 and 2020). This work unfolded over years, requiring patience and careful listening. We presented plans to the State Board of Education office staff (yes, the place where I now work); we learned about each other's institutional uniqueness and specific student populations. We conducted pilot placement projects and then reported on them to our statewide provosts' council. We wrote together and took those ideas back to our institutions; just as writing is a "social and rhetorical activity," as Kevin Roozen describes, so too is writing leadership (2015). Further, first-year writing curriculum is a "social and rhetorical" enterprise itself, as it is highly contextual—intentional, deliberate, designed for the students and the institutions within them—and it must be "social" in many ways since it is so intertwined with transfer of learning. These years of conversation, experimentation, and proposals resulted in some changed lines in state policy. They also engaged me in a transformative leadership experience that unfolded over time and through compromise and shared trust.

While the placement work took place across the state, another key leadership experience was situated directly within our own first-year writing program. About seven years ago, the associate director of the first-year writing program, dawn shepherd, and I facilitated a years-long curriculum change project at Boise State. Drawing on our commitments to learn better together, we hosted workshops, discussions, and professional learning communities. We sought to lead with humility—"enough humility to learn, to be taught, to have teachers" in our colleagues even as they learned from us (brown 2017, 10). While this change process was quite different from what I'd experienced a decade earlier at Eastern Michigan—it unfolded over years; internal department turmoil added layers of struggle to the work—we sought to hold on to whatever trust we had through conversation and discussion and encouragement. Without shared trust, change becomes nearly impossible (we explore this experience further in Estrem, shepherd, and Shadle 2019).

When our curricular discussions stalled around issues of perceived standardization and a loss of autonomy—a moment that felt loud, messy, and personal—I initially retreated to reflect, process my frustration, and regroup alone. After reminding myself that "adaptive and relational" leadership was what I really valued and wanted to embody, dawn shepherd and I co-wrote course guidance documents with input from others and invited instructors to experiment with them and give feedback (brown 2017, 23). Then, the COVID-19 pandemic hit, and the fragile trust that had been established grew stronger as instructors generously and quickly shared materials, ideas, and strategies for moving to fully online instruction. However, some threads of tension remained, and our "reflexiveness and self-questioning" led to many hours of discussion among the writing program leadership team (Adler-Kassner 2008, 32). This wasn't a seamless leadership experience, and while there were some gains, there was not the widespread impact or buy-in that we'd worked so hard to attain.

Not long after that experience, I read Annie Duke's book *Thinking in Bets* (2018). Her description of how decision-making unfolds in poker helped to frame the curriculum project work for me: "What makes a decision great is not that it has a great outcome. A great decision is the result of a good process, and that process must include an attempt to accurately represent our own state of knowledge. That state of knowledge, in turn, is some variation of 'I'm not sure'" (2019, 27). An effort that felt like a leadership failure ensured that I experienced firsthand how to separate the process from the results. I left that experience with a different kind of humility, deepened through realizing that even the best intentions and the most thoughtful process will lead in unanticipated directions. The lingering regrets helped deepen my empathy for all involved—including myself. My commitments to "consensus-based, systematic, thoughtful processes" as well as to "ongoing, loud, sometimes messy dialogue...to ensure everyone is heard and, hopefully, represented" hadn't been implemented perfectly, but the uneven experience likely taught me more than a "successful" one would have (Adler-Kassner 2008, 32–33).

The State Educational Policy Context

How, then, does my proclivity for collaboration, conversation, and leading with both humility and commitment unfold in a new context here in the office of the State Board of Education? Because most readers of this collection will be more familiar with campus contexts but less so with state agencies, I will briefly describe this aspect of the educational ecosystem before exploring what I continue to learn about leadership in this context.

Idaho is unique in that we have one governing board for all public education. The State Board of Education has constitutional oversight over K–12 education, governs our four public four-year institutions as their Boards of Trustees or Regents, *and* serves as the coordinating board for our four community colleges. So, the full K–PhD span of public education is governed by one board (community colleges also have local governing boards and regularly report to both). Additionally, the State Board of Education governs the Division of Career and Technical Education, Idaho Public Television, and the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation.

The State Board of Education is composed of seven governor-appointed members and the elected superintendent; the Office of the Board of Education (OSBE) is made up of staff like me who support a wide variety of educational initiatives. The Executive Director of OSBE is appointed by the governor and serves as an ex-officio member of the Board. The workload for this part-time volunteer board is staggering: every two months, they read, synthesize, and make decisions that encompass everything from early literacy goal setting to contracts for university buildings to degree program approvals to annual agency reports. In a state like Idaho, where all of education (but especially higher education) is viewed with skepticism and is subject to shrinking state funding, the leadership and vision of the Board is critically important (see Hebel and Smallwood 2021, Jedeed 2024, Guido 2024).

OSBE has teams that focus on academic affairs (the higher education team), planning, policy and government affairs, college and career access, technology, research, finance, and school safety (see “Board Facts”). Within academic affairs, my colleagues and I provide leadership,

coordination, and support on a wide range of issues that affect all eight public postsecondary institutions. For example, people on the team I co-lead are responsible for areas including:

- proprietary and online school registrations;
- systemwide academic technologies;
- state research grant funding;
- postsecondary academic program review/approval process; and
- student affairs and dual credit.

The Chief Academic Officer and I facilitate a number of cross-state initiatives, policy development, and implementation projects. He leads the higher education portion of a statewide health care workforce committee, for example; I lead our statewide general education committee and AI professional development coordination. We both coordinate revisions to higher education policy when needed, and we both provide input to the executive director on a wide range of issues impacting higher education, and higher education funding, in our state.

The rhythm of work has shifted for me from the academic calendar to one driven by board meeting cycles and legislative sessions. Instead of semesters—the rhythms of which were very familiar to me—I now work in a two-month Board meeting cadence. While our academic affairs team isn’t directly involved in legislative work, we closely monitor education-related bills and provide input when requested. Our physical proximity to the capitol—our building is connected via an underground tunnel—serves as a constant reminder of the political context surrounding our work.

Collaborative State Educational Policy Revision

To illustrate how leadership learning manifests in practice, I’ll detail a recent policy revision process that exemplifies both the application of my writing program–developed approaches and the unique demands of state-level leadership. In early 2023, I was asked to initiate a revision of Board Policy III.Q, Admissions Standards. Even though this policy wasn’t on our annual review schedule, it was brought to our attention through an Admissions Director at one of our state universities, who

met with us to explain that the policy hindered his work with a particular student population. The policy had been written in such a way that highly prepared students had to be admitted through an “alternative admissions” process, which was affecting their recruiting and engagement with these students. Drawing on approaches I had developed through years of facilitating change in and across writing programs, I began by mapping the policy’s impact across different stakeholder groups. Just as writing program changes affect students, faculty, and administrators differently, I knew this policy touched multiple constituencies:

- students interested in going on to college;
- high school counselors;
- postsecondary academic advisors;
- admissions officers;
- provosts responsible for institutional planning; and
- board members concerned with system-wide effectiveness.

This stakeholder mapping, informed by Adrianna Kezar and Daniel Maxey’s (2016) emphasis on understanding organizational networks, helped me identify potential allies and resistance points before beginning the revision process. The process also highlights how policy revision work at its best is deeply rhetorical and social.

The earlier leadership experiences had taught me that more conversation is better than less, and that a shared governance approach—which we had explicitly committed to on our academic affairs team here at OSBE—meant that I needed to deliberately work around the hierarchy embedded in a Board staff’s relationship to the institutions. So first, I met with admissions leaders, as one of them had surfaced the need for a revision. The conversations revealed how current policy was affecting all of our institutions—we just hadn’t asked and hadn’t realized its impact. Next, I drafted revisions to the policy and sought feedback from those within my office. With a full revision completed, I met again with constituency groups: in this case, admissions officers, and then registrars, and then provosts. As in my earlier work, I found that everyone was willing to engage honestly when they felt their expertise was valued.

The drafting process exemplified what Kezar (2018) calls “convergent leadership”: bringing together top-down and bottom-up perspectives. I developed multiple drafts based on community group feedback from registrars and admissions officers, tested proposed language with real-world scenarios, and refined based on practical considerations. Throughout this process, I drew on skills developed through years of writing program leadership. The ability to synthesize multiple perspectives, anticipate implementation challenges, engage community groups to provide purposeful input, and craft language that serves multiple audiences—all crucial writing program leadership skills—proved invaluable in policy development.

I recognized that policy change requires careful attention to roll-out and support. In many ways, this policy revision and implementation process was relatively simple; since community groups had been engaged early in the process, they were ready to work within this policy as soon as it was approved. It now moves onto our schedule for regular policy review every few years.

Continuing Leadership Education

Through these experiences, I’ve deepened several leadership approaches that guide my work. These strategies, while grounded in specific contexts, continue to build from broader themes in Writing Studies scholarship and Kezar’s (2018) research on institutional change.

Linda Adler-Kassner’s (2008) framework for writing program advocacy provides a useful model for state-level work. She emphasizes the importance of understanding and using institutional narratives, building strategic alliances, connecting local concerns to broader educational values, and using research purposefully, and those strategies—which I practiced in writing programs for decades—also inform my work here. For example, when addressing Board member questions about the role of general education, I used Adler-Kassner’s approach to story-changing, helping reframe the narrative from one of inefficiency to one of student success and engagement—and workforce development. I have led an effort to infuse “durable skills” into content-rich

general education courses at all eight institutions—starting with pedagogy and curricula before moving to policy revisions—and this work has enabled many external groups to better understand the role and purpose of general education. Writing program leadership is steeped in pragmatic compromise, state leadership even more so. I work and interact with a much wider variety of people with various entry points for understanding postsecondary education. I've come to enjoy this rhetorical challenge.

Adrianna Kezar's (2018) research has been particularly relevant to state-level leadership. Her emphasis on developing "multi-hub networks" that connect different types of change agents resonates with how I have structured statewide initiatives with more communication and more input than I might think is necessary. Our general education reform work now intentionally connects faculty discipline groups, their faculty communities at their home institutions, and the state general education committee (which includes representatives from other groups impacted by general education: dual credit, open educational resources, digital pedagogy, registrars, and technical colleges). All of these networks and interactions swirl to support any change initiatives.

Do leadership and advocacy unfold similarly on campus and in a state educational policy office? In some ways, yes: my commitments to conversation, shared governance, and engaging with stakeholders remains constant. In practice, though, this work feels different in a number of ways. First, writing program leadership takes place in a setting where there is generally a shared discipline and/or commitment to one critical component of the college landscape: first-year writing. When my colleagues and I were working together on curriculum, for example, we might disagree about specific approaches, but we have the shared experience of teaching and learning within first-year writing that informs our discussions. Here in the state office, our networks are differently distributed and cast more widely across eight institutions. Each institution has a different funding capacity, distinct student body populations, and particular local contexts within which they work.

Within a writing program, practice—teaching writing—is the heart of the mission. Curricular guides, program policies, or institutional

processes arise in support of that mission. Here in the Board office, policy is more prominent in our work because that is the main way the Board communicates its values and expectations for the postsecondary institutions it governs. There is sometimes a tension between an institution's preference for what is best for its own students and our Board's statewide responsibility to all students, many of whom move across multiple institutions. Part of my job description is to assess how institutions are meeting state policies and address areas where there are gaps—a supervisory role that does not always sit comfortably for me, just as the supervisory aspects of writing leadership were not those that I enjoyed the most. Still, my OSBE colleagues and I work hard to position ourselves as allies and advocates far beyond any role in policy enforcement. Policy is rhetorical; like any public-facing texts, its polish sometimes belies the deeply contextual, relational, and conversational work behind it.

As I continue to settle into this role, I am grateful for the ways in which my decades of campus-level leadership inform what I do and how I do it. Here in the Board office, I am afforded glimpses into the larger educational landscape of our state, and I share Elaine Maimon's perspective that pragmatic liberal education is "essential to democracy" and that is what our state institutions are best at (2018, 127). I feel fortunate to be able to learn from and with colleagues from across eight institutions, all striving to engage students in postsecondary education in ways that are personally relevant and socially meaningful.

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