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ESSAYS

Mindful Administration: Toward a Theory of Academic Leadership We Can Live With

Sue Doe and Janelle Adsit

This article names barriers to faculty leadership and identifies specific ways that faculty can harness tools and resources needed to lead well. Through mindful and relational leadership practices, faculty can ensure that the values that academic communities espouse are made manifest.

This has been a difficult and vulnerable article to write. It has been an exercise in working through cognitive dissonance and identity-crisis as we navigated leadership roles in two public universities in California and Colorado. Janelle has served as department chair; Sue has been writing program administrator, faculty senate chair, and director of a center for teaching and learning.¹ We

1. Janelle became department co-chair in January 2021, in the midst of a crisis point at her university that was contextualized by the pandemic and ongoing budgetary constraints. Janelle stepped into the role mid-way through the academic year when her tenure file was under review. Janelle, with a co-chair (whose tenure file was also under review at the same time), stepped into the role in a time of confusion and instability. In this period, the university administration was “reorganizing” departments in the College, combining academic units to reduce costs. Chairing a department was not in Janelle’s career plan, and she felt inadequately prepared to lead.

Sue came to administrative work as an outgrowth of her participation in a rhetoric and composition program in which the faculty do rotations into and out of various writing program administration roles, or where at least that has been the long-held goal. Sue had experience with both writing center and writing-across-the-curriculum administration as well as with leading a campus writing integration initiative. She eventually took a rotation as writing program administrator, directing first-year and advanced composition and managing eight core curriculum writing courses. She held this role for five years although the standard was three, and then she was elected to be Chair of the Faculty Council (Senate) which involved liaising with upper administration in addition to leading shared governance processes for the faculty as a whole. Elected for each of three one-year terms in beginning at the start of the pandemic in March of 2020, she was soon thrust into high-level discussions around an athletics scandal, around an absence of diversity and social justice orientations in the curriculum, and in a complete university restructure of the administration involving the termination of the President. At the end of this term-limited role, Sue then applied for and was selected to administer the university’s teaching and learning center, leaving the English Department where there seemed nowhere to go except back into the administration of the writing program. She maintains her tenure line

have been outwardly successful in these roles, but inwardly dissatisfied with not only the effectiveness of our efforts but the toll on our persons.

Upon entering our positions, we quickly recognized that we were lacking a theory of leadership to guide our decisions and practices. We stepped into mid-level faculty leadership roles without a clear framework or compass to orient our actions. While our classroom practice has been supported by a pedagogical philosophy informed by scholarship that weighs the politics and potential of our choices in working with students, our leadership practice had no equivalent. We had no articulated leadership praxis to help us navigate the moment-to-moment complexity of institutional life. This absence became a pressing concern as we faced increasingly high-stakes decisions and ethical challenges in our administrative work.

In response, we turned to self-study as a method of inquiry. We endeavored not only to understand what we were doing, but why. We made many attempts to reflect on the exigencies we felt but could often not name: we kept hour-by-hour work-logs, identifying our in-the-moment decision-making and naming where our time and energies were spent; we kept track of anecdotes as snapshots of ourselves doing the messy work of navigating life within these roles. While we ultimately left these methods behind, we continued to write this article over the span of five years. These years were shaped by significant cultural and political upheaval, defined in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement, the global pandemic, and the first Trump administration. We write in a context of threats not only to public education but to the very idea of intellectual freedom. We feel acutely the stakes of our work—and the necessity of courageous, steadfast, and responsive leadership—in this political moment.

In the years of writing this we met as co-authors regularly, often on a weekly basis, to reflect on our experiences. The conversations became a way for us each to process what was occurring in our immediate circumstances. Slowly—with many interruptions and through frustration and overwhelm—we came to name our situation: The administrative aspects of faculty life often feel soul-sucking, but abandoning them entirely is not an option; there is too much at stake.

More than just a set of coping mechanisms or managerial tactics, what we needed was a robust theory and model—one capable of holding the complexity of leadership and acknowledging the “betwixt and between” nature of our roles. Our work exists in an interstitial space: between policy and pedagogy, between bureaucracy and imagination, between the institutional and the personal. It became clear to us that claiming space for a thoughtful reconceptualization of leadership—one deeply informed by the theoretical and academic work

today, but less of her role looks like a faculty one although she constantly finds herself explaining faculty perspectives to administrators and staff.

we engage in as scholars—was both urgent and necessary. We are interested in moving into this under-theorized terrain deliberately, claiming and naming it as legitimate intellectual and institutional work. Leadership, we argue, should not exist outside or beneath the scholarly disciplines, but rather as an integral part of them. It is a conversation that belongs squarely in the realm of theory and praxis, and one that must be treated with the same critical rigor and reflective seriousness that we bring to our teaching and research.

Our goal has been to reclaim agency and to hold tight to our values in the tumult of the administrative role. Our administrative lives are not ancillary to our academic missions; they are central to the ongoing project of making universities livable, ethical, and intellectually honest spaces.

Our effort is not to absolve or romanticize administration, nor to pathologize it, but to examine how roles are constructed. Rhetorics that stigmatize administration as the “red pill” or the “dark side” often carry with them a pernicious purism; a refusal to engage with the “dirty work” of institutional maintenance also maintains the hierarchies of the status quo. To dismiss administrative work on these terms often functions as a kind of denial, an abdication of responsibility at a time when leadership is desperately needed.

What We Mean by ‘Task Mind’

Through our methods of self-examination, we found that we were regularly enacting what we came to refer to as “task mind” —a shorthand term that we use to describe the reactive, agitated state of “putting out fires” and “task-mastering” our way through the roles we have taken on.

While we don’t wish to generalize—i.e., not all administrative life is characterized by this mindset, nor is the phenomenon we describe limited to administration— this reactive, hyper-vigilant state may be prompted and perpetuated by institutional conditions. The term “task mind” is imperfect as a description of the default approach to administrative work that we found in ourselves. The term’s simplicity risks erasing the hierarchies and privileges that shape who gets to perform which forms of labor, and how that labor is valued. Ultimately, we chose to stay with the term not because it resolves these tensions, but because it keeps them visible. Writing together has made us aware of how language itself can reproduce the very elitism we seek to critique, and our considerations in naming became a mirror for our own assumptions about intellectual labor, effort, and worth.

Our act of naming was ultimately an attempt to become better observers of ourselves. As we’ve experienced it, task mind is a “haze” generated as the sympathetic nervous system pushes through the basic stresses of a given day, enacting forms of work far less onerous than the labor carried out by the majority of work-

ers on this planet. With little recognition of our own relative power and capability to interrupt the “business-as-usual,” we keep moving with the inertia of task mind. The signs of our obedience to it are in our bodies: the physical dis-ease of the Zoom calls we stay seated for, the Pavlovian addiction to the sound-signature of an arriving email, the nightly bouts of insomnia and associated panic about issues that are not worthy of the strain on our hearts and metabolisms—especially when measured against the profound and consequential harms endured in the world beyond our screens.

The physical cost of such labor is felt differently by different bodies, as it is also exacerbated by racism, heteronormativity and homophobia, cis-sexism, ableism, and other forms of intersectional oppression. We write with this embodied reality as our exigence, as we also attend to the implications of our actions: of the complicity that comes from handling the next thing in front of us with little regard for how a given decision contributes to broader goals. Task mind is a kind of self-coercion and delusion that is ultimately “mindless,” as a form of “monkey mind.” Christy L. Wenger offers these terms in *Yoga Minds, Writing Bodies*, to describe the tendency toward “unthinkingly reacting to everything that comes our way.” Whereas mindfulness is a “practice of reconnecting with ourselves... to give measure to our actions, teaching us that we can control our response to stimuli by listening to our bodies and using our energy productively” (ix). Task mind is, in contrast, an anxious unawareness, and it may bring about a range of unfavorable experiences—even some that may border on the comic or the absurd, such as it did for us in Fall 2022:

At the end of a typically stressful week in her role as chair, Janelle found herself literally lost in a 1,200 acre forest in the middle of the night, walking with her department’s program leader. Out for what they thought would be a quick “walk and debrief” of the afternoon’s department meeting they had facilitated, the two became so immersed in their conversation about department processes that they lost track of space and time, with very limited cell phone service and no food or water. They disrupted a colleague’s evening with a text message with their GPS location, asking to be found.¹ When the county sheriff rescued them at midnight, seven hours and many miles from where they had started, the conversation about work still continued in the back of the police car. The experience of work culture was so consuming that it can literally make one lose one’s way.

In the Fall of 2022, near the start of her final year as the chair of the faculty senate, Sue fell while out for a run and injured her dominant hand.

1. Thanks to Renée Byrd for most kind help in this moment of need.

The partially detached tendons might have healed if she had rested her hand, but instead she resumed work from her laptop almost immediately, altering the use of her fingers on the keyboard. A few months later, due to overuse, she had detached the tendons completely and now was thrust into physical and occupational therapy to prepare the hand for surgery. Nine months after the original injury, she had surgery, but this was just two weeks after starting a new administrative position directing the teaching and learning center so she did not feel she could take time off or depend for long on voice-to-text software to do her keyboarding for her. She returned to work too quickly, and another nine months later needed a re-do of the surgery with the doctor saying, “I detect a pattern here. You’re going to have to assure me that you will rest your hand for six to eight weeks before we move forward with a second surgery.” The injury to her dominant hand was bad enough; more concerning still was a work ethic so ingrained that care of the self was out of the question. Sue’s good fortune in having been healthy most of her life now showed itself for what it was— an internalized ableism and a substantial conceit, a self-effacement and stoicism that was not only a misplaced source of pride but an obstacle to healing.

We are cognizant of the privilege of being able to preoccupy ourselves with work culture, the privilege of being able to trust in our survival and to be able to call for help. The privilege of unlimited trips to occupational therapy and insurance coverage for not one but two surgeries—the privilege even of writing about all of this during work hours. Our privilege as tenured white women in the academy also allows for the work behaviors we’ve fallen into; work can be at the forefront of our minds only because our basic needs are met. We share our experience not because it is generalizable but because it perhaps can provide a lens on the university apparatus that conditions us and that we have in many ways given ourselves over to. We are complicit in its workings. To find a form of faculty leadership² we can live with—a form of leadership that supports our own and others’ living—is about more than helping ourselves and others with an immediate problem of distraction, overwhelm, and burnout; it is about the broader objectives of higher education and the ethos of leadership that our educational values require.

2. We define faculty leaders as those who either choose or are thrust into leadership of programs, centers, departments or governance committees and who possess the training associated with faculty roles and criteria for selection. For the purposes of our discussion, we distinguish faculty leadership from that of vice presidents, vice provosts, and deans who may have “retreat rights” to a faculty position but were not hired into a faculty research or teaching role.

Some of the Broader Problems of Academic Leadership

As we sought a theory of faculty leadership we could live with—one that is aligned with our values and that would complement our orientations as teachers and scholars—we first looked close to home, writing studies scholarship, which has a long history of theorizing faculty leadership in the role of the Writing Program Administrator, or WPA, due in part, to the fact that writing programs are vexed by many of the same leadership challenges as universities generally. WPAs manage large programs that involve significant investment in faculty who have opportunity (and obligation) to address the needs of nearly all undergraduates who are variously prepared for college. WPAs participate in capitalist labor practices that bring together a small number of tenure-line “bosses” (Sledd), “droids” (Nelson), “faculty-managers” (Klausman); and “lower-level management in the managed university” (Bousquet 496) with a large number of contingent faculty who generally possess little job security. WPAs and their programs have generally had to shift, or be conciliatory, to meet the needs of not only students but the current priorities of their institutions (Skinnell). Yet while theories of WPA praxis have become increasingly robust, including the feminist orientations articulated by Casie Fedukovich and Sue Doe as well as Laura Micciche and Donna Strickland, it is also the case, as Strickland points out, that WPAs often undergo a tacit, undertheorized, and “unofficial schooling in the management of...teachers and programs” (1)—an “unofficial schooling” that most often happens on the job. Such schooling is generally inadequate to the task of providing the leadership praxis that writing programs most need, much less leadership at higher levels of university administration.

More specifically, faculty who find themselves leading programs or departments may rarely have cause or opportunity to consider the values that guide day-to-day decision-making, to convey vision, objectives, and ethical codes to self and others, or to find touchpoints/supports to encourage deliberate reflection within a community of practice of fellow leaders. For example, faculty leaders rarely take part in a dedicated and sustained mentoring program. They/we may be exposed to “chair training” or required to complete an HR-mandated training for supervisors, but such efforts are mired in administrative compliance—not vision and strategy. The absence of the genres and forums that would facilitate a reflective orientation to leadership is symptomatic of our circumstances: we become utterly consumed by all the work it takes to make the machine operate and are thus distracted from thoughtfully applying our theoretical frames as leaders. As a result, we too often don’t contemplate, much less articulate, the rationale behind what we are doing, and in the process become all the more susceptible to the trends of disaffection with leadership itself. Similarly, faculty who become leaders within governance units such as faculty senates are often inad-

equately prepared as well, a problem that Robert Scott, in the *Journal of Academic Freedom* described this way: “Unfortunately, few campuses devote resources to preparing faculty members for their roles and responsibilities for governance or for leadership in faculty committees and senates. As a consequence, faculty are sometimes criticized for not fulfilling their governing roles adequately. But the fault lies with trustees and presidents who pay too little attention to this important dimension of university governance and leadership” (4).

When faculty do become leaders at higher levels of their universities, the implications of their shortcomings compound and complicate. The individualist nature of faculty life with respect to its expectations and rewards can too often become a failure to do broad systems thinking, as institutional conventions tend to treat faculty members as if each were an independent entrepreneur instead of a small component of a larger whole. Under such circumstances, even well-intended decision-making may proceed without sufficient thinking about downstream effects (Lane). Structures that work well for faculty in traditional research and teaching roles may be wildly out of step with current trends and university formations. For instance, if today’s faculty have elected out of, or been shielded from, conversations about competency-based learning and short-term certificate and micro-credential programs, they may be unaware of how poorly the traditional semester aligns with current thinking about postsecondary access, new-learner populations, and work-learn cycles (Zalaznick). A significant additional danger in leaving faculty out of such conversations is that they (we) then do not offer critical feedback as decisions move forward.

We note that the challenges associated with cultivating leaders are not limited to the higher education setting, nor is the desire “not to lead” an attribute strictly belonging to faculty. In 2006, Thomas Tierney predicted a “leadership deficit” due to a failure of organizations to cultivate new leaders; organizations instead allow individuals to “fall into” leadership or be pressed into service rather than to aspire to the challenges of leading. The international nonprofit APQC (American Productivity and Quality Center), which provides training and consultation to over 1000 organizations and 45 industries worldwide, reports that this leadership deficit derives from an absence of attention to developing among employees the major competencies associated with effective leadership—strategic thinking, change management, knowledge sharing, listening, and emotional intelligence—with the result being dependence on leaders who are mired in traditional ways of thinking (Lam). Similarly, Frances Kunreuther and Sean Thomas-Breitfeld, writing for *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* in 2024, reported that persons of color were moving into leadership roles at nonprofit organizations more to correct deficits in leadership representation than to support the active cultivation of their leadership potential. In 2023, the Neuroleadership Institute pointed to post-pandemic causes for the current unmet need for new

leaders, including the several years of lockdown that reduced the pipeline of leaders, remote work practices that led to reduced visibility of emerging leaders, and the articulation of new priorities among workers themselves. Nick Lynch, writing for *Forbes* in 2024, called out many of the same trends and factors and recommended a shift in organizational culture focusing on less rigid work requirements and efforts to “foster a culture of abundance and collaboration” in which there’s focus on “building strong relationships and trust.” Together these many indicators suggest that many sectors are grappling with ways to be mindful of the humanity of potential leaders. Perhaps we are at a time when leadership itself is being called to change in order to reflect pandemic-era realizations, such as the reasonableness and effectiveness of flexible work arrangements, the importance of cultures that celebrate the wholeness of people, the value of genuinely collaborative approaches, and the insistence on self-preservation. In this context, university administrators are reporting burnout, yet often, due to their positions, feel unable to say so. Unable to express their suffering or take time for self-care, they have been leaving administrative work in droves. A 2021 report shows that search firms were experiencing unprecedented low levels of interest in administrative positions, even at chair and dean levels (Perlmutter).

Perhaps part of the problem is that governing boards of universities and the faculty, alongside even those who come up through the faculty to become administrators, have differing views of leadership, even in terms of their university president. It has been said that “boards look increasingly to the president as a corporate-style leader, [while] faculty members still expect a president to be the academic-in-chief” (Kelderman). And faculty often feel that the corporate processes that universities have embraced since at least the 1980s—see George Keller’s *Academic Strategy: The Management Revolution in Higher Education*—work at cross purposes to faculty values, imposing “uninspiring linearity of goal, objective, and action” as well as “the mechanistic progression from environmental scan, value proposition, mission, vision, strategic matrix, key performance indicators, and implementation benchmarks and milestones” (Utz). Perhaps most tellingly the language of corporatized university leadership has trended toward words like “agility” and “nimbleness”—terms that are associated with war, sports, and dog training. As Richard Utz points out, the term “agility” derives directly from the Westminster Kennel Club’s description of a [dog] breed’s standard of performance in relation to its owner-handler.

For some very good reasons, then, faculty may resist “the call to lead,” perhaps in part because we fear what we might become or what we are becoming part of. Stepping into leadership may mean stepping away from the traditional rewards and recognitions of faculty; we sense we are giving up that which we were trained and love to do—our scholarship and our teaching. We find it difficult to keep up with the literature in our area, harder still to generate it our-

selves. Plus, asked to make tough decisions as administrators, we risk alienating our faculty colleagues. And this is all geometrically much harder for faculty-administrators of color who find themselves shouldering heavier loads while dealing with, for example, “the persistent exhaustion and terror of being Black in the academy” (Simula).

Yet faculty can become effective leaders and change agents, as Emily M. Janke has pointed out, defining the rise of scholar-administrators who “leverage the skill sets, perspectives, networks, and resources they possess—as scholars who continue scholarly approaches and agendas—in their administrative positions to push proactively for change” (110). As Janke points out, many faculty get into administration and leadership due to a desire to see change and because leadership “affords them access to resources and networks that are necessary for change, and which may not be otherwise possible, for example, as a faculty member within an academic department” (110). Similarly, Aaron Coe and Ravi Chinta found in their case study of five scholar-administrators that “the scholar-administrator was more connected to the people within and outside the university, their own field of practice, and with the university than were administrative peers who did not engage in scholarship” (abstract). These scholar-administrators were helping their organizations stay abreast of emerging trends. All in all, it seems there is something to be said of combining a scholarly agenda with leadership and administration, assuming that a reasonable workload distribution can be achieved.

Leadership and Maintenance of the Status Quo

Attention to leadership, as a praxis that is responsive to the ongoing and emergent situations of the academy, is still lacking in our scholarly conversations. Because we don’t have a reflective practice that is scaffolded by the field, faculty may fall back on “business as usual” modes when we step into leadership roles. Every action that a faculty member undertakes is going to be part of—and one could argue complicit with—the status quo because it is virtually impossible to work within a system without reinforcing it. Even as the idea of the “campus radical” persists, this figure is, in Vijay Prashad’s words, “the domesticated rabble rouser who provides the academy with its illusion of ideological diversity.” Yet their potential to radically shift the status quo remains limited. Broadly speaking, faculty leaders may find themselves ill-equipped to use their roles for institutional transformation, succumbing to forces that reward obedience to university norms.³ As Sara Ahmed observes, “A system is reproduced by rewarding those who are willing to reproduce the system” (100). The pressure to “serve” within

3. See also Boggs, Abigail, Eli Meyerhoff, Nick Mitchell, and Zach Schwartz-Weinstein. “Abolitionist University Studies: An Invitation.” 2019. Web. <https://abolition.university/>

the institution may easily slip into being of service to the institution, if one does not have the time, energy, and support to maintain a reflective practice through one's work. There are many forces that reward obedience; this is as true in the classroom as it is in the meeting room: the obedience of the student who obeys the strictures of an assignment runs parallel to the obedience of the faculty member who "plays their part" to the satisfaction of those of higher rank. Those of us with the privilege to have been deemed "good students" within the system are beneficiaries of that system. We in turn find the capital to continue our work in the academy; in such ways are we then poised to replicate its systems and obey its norms, even with the overlay of the criticality and politics we may espouse. Ironically, faculty's embeddedness in extant systems exists alongside the persistent image of faculty as obstinate and obstructionist. Such characterizations may function as administrative justification for why faculty voices are circumscribed. The casting of faculty as withholding and self-serving may be emblematic of the ongoing antagonism between classes that often find themselves pitted against each other on key issues.

In the midst of strident calls for increased compensation for all employee groups given extreme inflationary pressures, university administration at Sue's institution agreed to a significant across-the-board pay increase but publicly associated those raises with increased tuition (Lyell), thereby deflecting student unhappiness with rising tuition back onto faculty and staff "selfishness." Faculty and staff, not wishing to embitter students, parents, or taxpayers quietly submitted to low or no pay raises for the next few years in order to not appear self-serving, despite the fact that cost-of-living and compensation analyses suggested that pay increases were appropriate and overdue. Faculty and (especially) staff colleagues paid a significant price for faculty unwillingness to step out boldly and challenge the status quo. As the employees with the most job security, it is up to the faculty to show leadership on matters that affect not only themselves but others. Yet faculty are too often reluctant to rock the boat.

At the same time, the system continues to reward those who are perceived as cooperative: faculty who align themselves with administrative priorities may be more likely to receive institutional support—such as a provost's signature on a sabbatical request or a favorable outcome in the tenure process. As Nicholas de Genova writes, "it is the tenure process that serves as the most decisive disciplinary technology within academia" (321). Through such disciplinary mechanisms, faculty are entrusted to maintain institutional values.

invitation/ The authors argue against depoliticizing histories and theories of the university that sustain obedience to its status quo.

As chair of faculty senate, Sue places two motions on the senate agenda, one dealing with graduate activity fees that the trustees have agreed to cover, the other dealing with a section of the faculty manual relating to intellectual property and overseen by a broad-based governance group that includes university lawyers. Both agenda items are called back by the president's office due to the anticipated effect of these progressive commitments being codified into the legally binding manual. Simultaneously, a new chief operating officer contacts the chair of the faculty senate to say that he has been charged by university counsel to create a policy committee on policies (to generate a policy on policies!) This policy committee had been created to police the "renegade" faculty whose long service as the writers of policy was no longer needed ... or wanted. The policy experts signal that they intended to manage policy and 'free' the faculty to do their real work: teaching and research, not governance.

Faculty Leadership Roles Are Fraught

With limited resources and ever-increasing demands under the university's "efficiency models," it may be nearly irresistible for faculty to accept an offer to focus on just one of the so-called "pillars" of the professoriate: to just "teach" or just "do research." However, this phenomenon results in a class stratification of the university that serves to consolidate decision-making power, along with the benefits of institutional wealth, in the hands of the few—i.e., those who hold full-time administrative positions and are themselves managed by governing boards that are authorized by state governments and philanthropic shareholding. The aspects of faculty life (i.e., research, teaching, service) continue to be divided and compartmentalized within the Taylorism of university corporate policy (Brown; Kezar and Sam).⁴ And stewarding the university, which is to say leading, appears nowhere in this stratified efficiency model of faculty labor but is instead relinquished to the administrative class—with an associated forfeiture of participative governance and aspirations toward an inclusive intellectual community. Faculty leadership is curtailed and granted limited access to decision-making power, sometimes without even a seat at the table of actual governance. Faculty leader-

4. The most obvious casualties of the debundled faculty are the contingent teaching faculty, who, off the tenure track and generally responsible for little new knowledge production, carry hypnotically high teaching loads that in turn maintains a class division that maintains their colleagues, the tenurable research faculty at levels above them in this constructed hierarchy. Largely disenfranchised and undervalued, these teaching faculty are singularly associated with the revenue production that increasingly funds the enterprise, including its leadership. The debundling of faculty roles is thus directly connected to the development of a management class in higher education.

ship becomes reduced to “management” of programs and peers—a shell game that involves spreadsheets, the clever manipulation of resources, and, often, the maintenance of “no-win” labor situations and the betrayal of colleagues.

Faculty culture can allow for and even reinforce these circumstances. In 1998, Richard E. Miller warned against faculty’s “willed ignorance about the bureaucratic intricacies of life in the academy”; to eschew the bureaucratic is applauded as virtuous within faculty culture, Miller observed, and rendered “a sign of elevated intelligence” (3, 9, quoted in Strickland). Faculty may refuse to come near the orbit of administration as if one might inevitably succumb to the gravity of corporatized logics—or, resisting it, might imagine oneself innocent of fraught university systems. But this disavowal—what Hugh Heclo calls “institutional distrust”—comes at great cost. Faculty distaste for the business of leading our universities has, whether consciously or not, amounted to a forfeiture of the rights and responsibilities of the faculty. The righteous unwillingness to “get one’s hands dirty” with administrative work in order to preserve a “pure” space of intellectual life translates to reward structures that value certain traditional forms of research over the “service” work of university leadership from within the faculty ranks. Tenure and promotion guidelines and department processes do little to support and scaffold faculty leadership and instead impose ever heightening productivity standards against which a program or unit leader will likely be at a significant “productivity disadvantage.” Administrative work pulls a person out of the classroom and leaves little focused time for research, writing and scholarship—especially as one is “on call” for the broad range of program, departmental, and university concerns.⁵ Leadership work is all-encompassing, and yet it becomes shoehorned into “service” work within the unyielding requirements of the personnel file.

Turning Toward a Theory of Leadership We Can Live With

In the face of these circumstances, we seek an emancipatory vision for our leadership roles that can meet the warranted reluctance to participate in institutional neoliberalism. We argue for a leadership that works to unseat rather than reinforce the status quo. The form of leadership we envision as faculty ourselves is one that works for rather than against our own and our colleagues’ personal best interests and professional standards.

5. These reductions in scholarly activity also impact the conversation and the thought and theory our fields can access and develop: If scholarship matters, then the absence of it matters, too. How do we measure that which does not happen within our intellectual communities when faculty are called upon to do the management of the mundane but have little time or access to address the most important decisions of the university in scholarship or in the meeting room?

We seek to reclaim an idea of leadership as the enactment of power over versus power to. Power over leads to forms of authoritarianism that reinforce hierarchy and engage in oppressive abuses of power, even when (or perhaps especially when) such abuses are subtle and nuanced. Power to involves the power to act on, to effect change, and to engage in generative power which we define as unleashing possibilities and liberating all to achieve their best hopes and dreams so that education might flourish. As faculty, especially those of us with tenure, we do have some agency and purchase within the university—the privilege of relative job security and power in our ability to collectively organize, whether we can do so officially or not, and whether we find ourselves in collective bargaining units or in right-to-work states. We also have powerful theories and understandings that equip us: We know the lie of neutrality. We know the neoliberal traps. Many faculty—especially those who have been most harmed by institutional culture—have what Sara Ahmed calls “counter-institutional knowledge of how universities work, for whom they work” (22), knowledge that is hard-won from the experience of seeking redress and accountability within university processes. Such institutional knowledge can be leveraged to instigate institutional change.

Elected to a faculty fellowship position on advising, Janelle worked with over a dozen colleagues to collaboratively build a report that argued for significant changes to the handling and messaging of “academic probation.” The report recommended moving away from the term “probation” because of its punitive connotations. While the submission of the report itself went unacknowledged by university leadership, change was realized in the months following the report, as the right people repeated the recommendations in the right conversations. A representative from Project Rebound joined the conversation, offering critical context on the term “probation” with the ethos to illuminate its harmful implications within the broader framework of a carceral society. Change happens in academic institutions through a kairotic combination of ethos and relationship. Janelle sees this example of leadership as a case study for how change-making is often non-linear, launched through relationship-building and maintained through ongoing conversations that help to change awareness and understanding over time. Change cannot always be programmed or set to a particular timeline. It happens through ramified networks and unpredictable, emergent processes. Our work is to adapt and respond to what emerges, while continuing to move with accountability and integrity. Attuning to the particular conditions of a space and finding ways to communicate compassionately and strategically in the moment is often an effective way forward.

Joddy Murray, Dean of the College of Liberal Arts at Southern Illinois University, professor of rhetoric, and former faculty senate chair, recommends a version of leadership that is tied to complexity theory, where leaders are “facilitators of connectivity, rather than ... keepers of increasingly distilled expertise within specialized hierarchies or organizational charts” (513). Murray asserts that “complexity theory argues that complex organizational behavior is characterized by non-linear, emergent change; interaction and interdependency; unpredictability; autocatalytic behavior; and dynamic movement” (515) which holds promise for creating “new patterns of coherence and structures of relation” (514). Such a model reduces dependence upon charismatic or authoritative leaders while releasing the potential of “the collective over the individual” (517).⁶

With Murray, we seek a form of leadership that aligns with the ways-of-knowing and values we profess in the classroom. We see in Murray the capacity for articulating a theory of leadership that grows out of the ways we research, teach, and live. A holistic understanding of leadership can be robust enough to meet the enervating realities of the university as it stands today. A theory of leadership that we can live with will be one that promotes living and thriving in the face of dehumanizing conditions.

We have learned recently about the U.S. Surgeon General’s description of toxic workplaces as genuine threats to the health and wellness of workers and how these threats often manifest in higher education settings as bullying and disrespect (Orbe-Austin). Sue was bullied by a colleague, and departmental leadership was averse to confronting the bullying behavior. As a result, Sue decided to seek new opportunities elsewhere in her university. She now aspires to more courageous forms of leadership than were modeled for her.

We seek a theory of leadership that recognizes the whole self, including what Paul Puccio names as a “spiritual dimension...[to] all aspects of how our institutions work” (81). That spiritual dimension recognizes the necessity of contemplation, an appreciation for uncertainty, attentiveness, inner growth, patience, forgiveness. Such a model of leadership brings community members into responsibility to the community, positioning them as conscious and committed actors-in-relation who are responsible to the group and to the good of the whole. Such a theory of leadership must counter the tendencies of white supremacy culture (Okun, et al.) and instead embrace the relational and the emergent, in ways articulated by adrienne maree brown in *Emergent Strategy*. Brown’s work

6. Murray, writing in 2017, connected this theory to the circulation of information and new formulations of authorship achieved through multiplying networks, an idea that seems to have predicted the rise of AI but perhaps could not imagine how non-authoritative multimodal authorship would become by 2025.

is guided by the famous words of Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, "All that you touch, you change. All that you change, changes you. The only lasting truth is change." *Emergent Strategy* guides us toward a radical acknowledgment of the deep interconnectedness that characterizes our living. The book calls us toward leadership as a living practice: fractal, tender, accountable, and awake to the impermanent and possibility of each moment. Brown views leadership as an adaptive practice that aligns with the patterns of the natural world: recognizing that all life is adaptive, nonlinear, iterative, and interdependent. Emergent strategy embraces complexity, uncertainty, and the idea that small, intentional actions can catalyze large-scale transformation.

Mindful leadership begins with the recognition that change is constant and complexity is fundamental. Leaders attuned to this reality embrace iterative, flexible, and responsive processes that hold space for multiple perspectives and needs. This approach resists rigid control and instead fosters ecologies of care, innovation, and adaptation—centered around integrity, empathy, and shared purpose. Mindful leadership is relational as it values interpersonal accountability and the cultivation of trust. Rather than rushing to resolution, mindful leadership moves slowly enough that difference can be respected and interconnectedness can be acknowledged. Mindful leadership accepts what is present, holding space for ambiguity and tension while remaining curious to the emergence of each moment. Mindful leadership embraces change and engages with it deliberately and ethically, seeing each moment as a call to evolve, to adapt with integrity, and to co-create futures that are more just, inclusive, and humane. Such an orientation also counters the illusion of permanence that so often drives institutional inertia and entrenchment.

Following the work of Beth Berila, Ruth King, Rhonda V. Magee, Zenju Earthlyn Manuel, Lama Rod Owens, Angel Kyodo Williams, and Jasmine Syedullah, we see mindful practice as foundational to an anti-oppressive orientation. A culturally sustaining theory of leadership will also be one that encourages our full participation, bringing our full, vulnerable selves to each space and encounter. In articulating such a theory of leadership, we are influenced by the theories of intersectional feminism, of antiracist practice, and of contemplative orientations to our work.⁷

As a prompt for further exploration, we offer a heuristic that simplifies, in binaristic terms, how we understand the status quo in contrast to transformational possibilities of leadership. We formatted the following as a T-table not to present a simple dichotomy, but to instead share a version of how change and redefinition can be imagined. The comparative list identifies a series of values and

7. See also Hinton, Mary Dana. *Leading from the Margin: College Leadership from Unexpected Places*. 1st ed., Johns Hopkins University Press, 2024.

guiding principles of leadership praxis, drawing from multiple sources of influence. We hope that this table, which represents our personal reflection, can be used and modified by others in articulating a theory of leadership. The table can prompt us to ask how a given decision is aligned with specific values—normative values that have sustained an institutional status quo or values that move the institution toward a different future. We organize the schematic with the labels of “task mind”—that term we came to as we reflected on our initial, default behavior patterns—and what we think of as mindful and relational leadership, drawing from the work of adrienne maree brown and others.

Table 1.

	TASK MIND Status Quo Maintenance	MINDFUL & RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP Transformation Toward Thriving
Precedent-Preserving vs. Community-Centered	• Preserving “the way it has been done” • Relying on precedent as default • Reacting to the immediate • Allowing defensiveness	• Valuing adaptation and responsiveness with integrity • Responding in alignment with core priorities, values and purpose • Operating from the assumption that change is constant • Considering the implications of decisions for generations to come • Being vigilant about continued complicity in institutional norms that have been exclusionary and subjugating (Stein, 2002; Kuokkanen, 2007)
Transactional vs. Humanizing	• Focusing on tasks over relationships • Insisting on input/output models	• Practicing interpersonal accountability • “Moving at the speed of trust”⁸ • Promoting healing • Thwarting systems and structures of privilege to move toward justice and inclusion • Responding with empathy, respect, and care • Leading with vulnerability toward growth (allowing fallibility, emotional exposure, humility enough to learn)

8. This is a principle of emergent strategy. brown, adrienne maree. *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*. AK Press, 2017.

Paternalistic vs. Responsive	Assuming there is a “right” answer (consistent with a paternalistic orientation)	- Inviting the complexity of decision-making and the need for multiple points-of-view - Honoring the stories and experiences of each person in the community - Valuing iterative, flexible, and experimental processes that are nuanced in response to needs
Homogenizing vs. Diverse	- Insisting on a dominant worldview or perspective - Comparing to a singular standard (deficit-based thinking)	- Committing to asset-based and growth-minded frames - Recognizing cultural wealth (Yosso) - Respecting epistemic difference (Kuokkanen) - Honoring difference and the specific needs of each person involved
Top-Down vs. Coalitional	- Maintaining a hierarchical structure - Centralizing leadership - Limiting transparency	- Holding to the principle: “Nothing about us without us is for us.” Those most affected by a decision lead the decision-making - Asking at every turn: who is at the table and who is not? What voices are centered and what voices are left out?
Undermining vs. Building	- Offering critique without vision - Dismissing and denigrating what is offered in earnest	- Moving toward vision - Mediating tensions and conflicts rather than ignoring or quashing them - Offering what is constructive - Collaborating in good faith and with attention to power relations
Fear-Based vs. Possibility-Based	- Assuming a zero-sum orientation - Presuming scarcity - Creating false urgency - Trafficking in fear	- Moving with vision toward transformation - Moving slowly enough that transformation can take effect

Depleting vs. Balancing	• Maintaining an ethos and environment that promotes workaholism, over-burdening, and burnout • Allowing unclear or unreasonable standards that prompt anxiety, fear, and striving • Focusing on the individual's productivity rather than the conditions of work • Manufacturing urgency	• Taking a whole-person orientation; prioritizing mind-body intelligence • Cultivating mindful practice; increasing awareness of body, feelings, thought • Slowing down and acting from calm awareness • Cultivating whole selves in relation • Offering flexibility and respecting personal boundaries around work • Optimizing work environments to create the conditions where vision, expression, and innovation can become possible
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Guided by adrienne maree brown's principles of emergent strategy we each have sought to transform our practice. We take to heart brown's recognition that "what you pay attention to grows" and we seek to bring mindful attention to the elements in our lives that contribute to thriving. Attentive to the mindful principle "how you do one thing is how you do everything," we turn to aspects of our lives outside the office as potential sites of transformation—practices that might translate back to our leadership on campus.

Nowadays, Sue is examining the leadership instincts she has lost and found, found and lost over the years by returning to something she loves, which is running. While she is not as fast as she was when her academic career began 30 + years ago, she is fortunate in that she can still put one foot in front of the other. Sometimes she walks, sometimes she hikes, sometimes she runs. When she does so, she is reminded that there is rarely a problem so big that her own movement through space doesn't provide at least provisional understanding, if not solution. Her own embodiment helps her to untangle that which defies knowing in front of a computer screen. Her surgically repaired hand reminds her of both her own vulnerability and her own strength. When she is in a meeting where there seem to be predators all around the table, she breathes deep and centers herself, all reptilian brain within a cerebral environment. She returns to what she knows deeply about how we must as humans become more responsible to each other and to the environment. All the literature in the world tells us this and the problems in our locus of control require clarity, not urgency, more understanding and judgment and less institutional logic. Even when our tendons are severed and our embodied selves compromised, we can deepen essential connections and restore the sinew of our professional and personal lives.

In 2023, Janelle stepped down from the chair position and took a sabbatical to complete yoga teacher training, with confidence that yoga philosophy and daily practice would transform her orientation to her institutional work. She is learning how steady awareness allows one to pause against the manufactured urgency of the next institutional crisis, the next call for slashing budgets, the next threat of closed programs. Non-attachment, of course, is not indifferent disengagement; it is a way of allowing each moment to teach what it teaches. Janelle seeks to lead from a place of accountability, partnership, and attentiveness to how power moves in institutions that have long perpetuated harm. She is inspired by Hollins University President Mary Hinton's advice that "most of leadership is managing yourself and your reactions to things."⁹ The strength of conscious presence allows one to slow the flood of demands enough to see their implications and ramifications. Such presence is what allows us to have capacity to move forward.

We share the above heuristic as only a starting point, and we recognize that the suggestions listed above will carry different meanings for different faculty, based on identity, cultural background, and so on. We see this heuristic as an invitation for each of us to situate our own leadership philosophies in relation to the interlocutors and influences that are meaningful to us. Karen Tellez-Trujillo provides an example of how to articulate one's archive of influence: In her discussion of Feminist Leadership Practices for the journal *Peitho*, Tellez-Trujillo writes of the "polyphony of voices" that have provided the values and lessons that guide her: for example, "community listening (Fishman, Garcia, House), difference (Kerschbaum), resistance (Anzaldúa, hooks, Enoch), language and experience (Lu), writing as a feminist (Ede and Lunsford), and as a Chicana (Ruiz, Ritchie), feminist rhetorical resilience (Flynn, Sotirin, Brady), solidarity and illusions of solidarity (Mohanty, Restaino), hope (Glenn), care (Royster, Kirsch), and storytelling (Cisneros)." An important exercise is for each of us to identify our own archive in this way — and the guiding principles we find there.

Mindful leadership is a reflective and relational orientation toward institutional life that seeks not merely to manage, but to transform systems toward thriving. Mindful leadership is grounded in deep awareness of self and others, and attentive to both the interpersonal and systemic dynamics that shape our institutions. It prompts us to ask, as Roderick Ferguson does in *The Reorder of Things*, "How are modes of power exercised upon the daily lives of minoritized subjects and knowledges and how was that exercise prepared for in histories that

9. The quote is from the Leaders on Leadership Podcast, Academic Search, Recorded August 2023 with Jay Lemsons. <https://www.academicsearch.org/blog/leaders-on-leadership-mary-dana-hinton/>. See also Hinton's book *Leading from the Margins*.

are supposedly no more?” (4). And what can we do to thwart those exercises of power that maintain an oppressive status quo?

Supporting Mindful and Relational Faculty Leadership: Steps to Take

We seek a scaffolding for leadership that is actual, rather than performative. We seek the forms of structural support that would enable faculty to truly “move the needle” in the direction of principles of justice, antiracism, equity, and inclusion. In what follows we elaborate some of the supports we find necessary to address the gap in how we prepare for, and how we value, faculty leadership.

1. Embrace and build upon theories of leadership, including those in writing studies, such as Joddy Murray’s work that deemphasizes the leader and accentuates leadership, “distributing power... across networks... that encourage collaboration” (522) so that a body of thought can be drawn upon as we take on these roles. Provide the specialized knowledge and the disciplinary support for faculty to become what Sara Ahmed calls “institutional mechanics” (27)—people with the knowledge of a system necessary to transform it.
2. Utilize genres that will promote self-reflection, including that of a “leadership statement” to work similarly to the teaching statement—a form of reflective writing that articulates one’s philosophy and orientation to a leadership role. The leadership statement should work in tandem with the diversity statement to specify an approach to administration that is explicitly accountable to values of equity and inclusion. Such “statements” need not take traditional form but might even include poems, parables, a collage, or other genre.
3. Create communities of practice and learning communities for faculty leaders. Establish (and materially support and compensate) mentoring relationships and formal opportunities that promote knowledge-sharing, connection, and support for faculty leaders.
4. Celebrate transformational successes—i.e., those moments where a vision of a more inclusive and antiracist institution are realized. Share stories between institutional communities to offer models and meaning for our work. These forms of celebration and recognition are a counterpoint to the strong pull to maintain institutional norms. Genuine connection and care can be a compelling means of enacting systemic and cultural change.
5. Rewrite tenure and promotion guidelines to offer recognition of transformational leadership in the tenure and promotion process. This includes: reallocation of expectations for promotion as well as clear guidelines for how administrative work will be documented and represented in the file.

6. Develop a cross-institutional code of ethics for faculty leaders. The American Association of University Administrators has a Code of Ethics, but we know of no similar code that applies to faculty leaders. Building the institutional documents—Code of Ethics, Standards of Professional Practice, etc. — can help guide our work and also articulate the scope and import of our role within the university community.
7. Create the infrastructure where statements of advocacy and practice for faculty leaders can be deliberated upon and developed for their rhetorical force in supporting broader policy and decision-making within educational institutions.
8. Compile a repository of resources for faculty leaders to make relevant research and scholarship more readily accessible. Prioritize common concerns in the role in the indexing process.
9. Generate forums for active conversation and peer-to-peer mentoring and support among faculty leaders across institutions—perhaps building upon what exists within organizations such as AAC&U, AERA, ACE, Teachers for Social Justice, and so on. An active international network of faculty leaders could have the power to make statements that lead to policy change, as it could also provide the means of lobbying for greater support and material access for individuals who are most disenfranchised within institutional hierarchies and resource allocations.
10. Continue labor activism and organizing, with an understanding that faculty labor conditions are student learning conditions. Support faculty in maintaining multiple pillars of academic life, including research and teaching and flexibility to design the roles that fit their skillset and interest, with assurance of job security and compensation.

Given our institutional conditions, our argument may be read as idealistic and impractical; yet, we would argue that our orientation is fundamentally pragmatic. It is about the practical matter of how we remain relevant to the students who come to us. An inclusive, culturally responsive education is an imperative. Improved educational conditions for all students and their families is an imperative. As faculty, our scholarship helps us touch the contours of what an antiracist education can be; we need to translate that theory into practice not only inside the classroom but for the institution at large. If we continue down the current path, we are headed toward irrelevance and continued harm. We need to create cultures that people want to be part of, and that means our institutions need to change. Fostering that change requires leadership, rather than merely acquiescence to administrative tasks.

We recognize that we are questioning some of the most entrenched assumptions of our profession: about the role of the faculty member on the campus,

about scope of work and responsibility, about the faculty member's relationship to the neoliberal university. We need to reorient so that we no longer see the work of leadership as a loathsome responsibility, but instead honor the responsibility and opportunity of it. This is an act of reclamation of the values we hold as educators. Indeed, our educational commitment depends on our deliberate cultivation of leadership capacity, in order to restore meaningful, deliberative participatory governance for faculty and students. We owe it to our students, who will become leaders themselves, to model a liberatory orientation to leadership, and we owe them an agentive relationship to their institution. Our work should also help forge new pathways for student leadership in the institution as well.

There is much stacked against us. The political realities we're facing in this current moment of 2025 mean that leadership today requires a fundamentally different orientation that is all the more vigilant about our obediences (whether anticipatory or enforced). We are in a moment that demands resistance, clarity, and moral courage. Our leadership practices have been formed not in stable times but in crisis after crisis. And yet, despite all this, we remain committed to imagining and enacting a better administrative life—one rooted in integrity, critical reflection, and hope.

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