The importance of exercising leadership at every level of college administration (essay)

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Choosing to Lead

On each campus, we often consider a small group of people leaders, but leadership is a collective activity that requires creativity and initiative at every level of institutional work, writes Judith S. White.

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By

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Those of us who work in higher education cannot depend on the small group that we traditionally refer to as the leaders on each campus to serve our students and our wider communities. It is important to develop the capacity to exercise leadership from any position in a college or university. Improving our institutions requires that everyone, whether in senior posts or supporting roles, uses whatever assignments we have to expand the possibilities for innovation, inclusion and excellence.

At HERS, Higher Education Resource Services, we sponsor the HERS Leadership Institutes, which more than 5,000 women faculty members and administrators have attended since 1976. The participants come from a wide diversity of positions, institutional types and career stages. That diversity reflects two fundamental principles of the HERS curriculum. First, we believe that developing an institutional perspective is necessary to leading in the complex environment of higher education today. Working with other leaders from the various silos is crucial to shifting our point of view. Second, we believe that leadership is a collective activity that requires creativity and initiative at every level of institutional work.

We also believe that leaders choose to lead. When I speak with the participants at the institutes, one of the first questions that I ask them is: What is your assigned role in your work? What is your chosen role?

If you have considerable discretion in shaping what you are asked or assigned to do, these roles may be close. If not, there may be quite a gap between the two. I see the choice as a measure of the leadership you are exercising in your work. Whatever your title, you are bringing your passions and values to the chosen role.

Why articulate this choice? As you think about your own projects and the roles you take, you may see choosing to

lead as part of the job. That is what you expect of yourself and of those you lead and mentor. So why go through the process of articulating this distinction between the assigned role and the chosen role? Three reasons:

You need to claim your choice to lead. In a world in which many people are either disengaged or actively disaffected from their work, your choice to invest your actions with meaning is significant. That you are willing to engage other people in creating value and improving our institutions merits attention and affirmation. You have strong capacity already.

Still, you need help. You need broader perspective and experience to complement your contributions. You also have the opportunity to affirm others' choices to lead. If you are experienced, you can be on the lookout for newer colleagues who have this same passion and need chances to expand. If you are less experienced or expanding your projects to areas new to you, the right mentor can provide guidance and also be energized by your mutual choice to make a difference.

You need to clarify your intentions. You need to know what you are really trying to accomplish. All too often the charge of having hidden agendas is made against those who are acting in ways hidden to themselves. If you know you intend to change the way things are done, you must recognize you are setting out to shift the privileges and preferences the current system maintains. You must be ready to explain why the goals require these changes. If you are clear about your intentions, you may find more ways of accomplishing the changes.

That sort of clarity is the first step in managing the conflicts that are inevitable in leadership projects. Knowing what you intend and being able to articulate those intentions will not make everyone want the same things. But modeling that clarity can help others recognize their intentions and be more open to new options.

You need to commit yourself to prepare and persevere through the challenges of choosing to lead. The road ahead for any leader is not easy, regardless of experience and authority within the institution. You have to face opposition and, sometimes worse, indifference. You have to cultivate supporters and communicate with those who have a stake in what you are changing. You have to uncover new resources, even as you watch funds and time used for "unworthy" purposes. Finding allies and mentors is vital.

There is one more crucial skill. It is likely the hardest thing you will ask of yourself and simultaneously the source of your greatest renewal: your ability to open yourself to learning and changing while you lead. You are in higher education because you know how exciting it is to learn and how important it is to change -- to lead a life that is more than tasks and outcomes. This is why, as you take on responsibility for completing your assignments, you commit yourself to the choice of leading for larger goals.

At HERS, we are dedicated to creating and sustaining a community of women leaders through leadership development programs and other strategies with a special focus on gender equity. We do this within the broader commitment to achieving equality and excellence in higher education. In the coming months, HERS will be providing guidance and counsel to women through biweekly posts to a new column, "Leading With HERS," about all aspects of leadership in academe.

The next piece, by my colleague Raymonda Burgman, director of HERS Institutes, will discuss strategic mentoring. We hope you will read and share our essays, and we look forward to hearing your comments and insights about them. Our goal is to be there with you, learning and growing, as you choose to lead.

Bio

Judith S. White became president and executive director of HERS in 2005. For more information on HERS, visit www.HERSnet.org.

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