

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Commentary

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Down With 'Service,' Up With Leadership

By Cathy N. Davidson

Since August of 2011, on what started out as a book tour, I've visited more than 80 campuses, research centers, association meetings, corporate events, foundations, academic leadership gatherings, and policy centers. The conversations have been as diverse as the institutions themselves, but there's been one notable area of concurrence: the shortage of talented faculty leaders at our institutions of higher learning.

I hear this lament from every quarter. Administrators say they often have to call upon the same small overworked group of faculty members to chair departments, committees, or initiatives successfully. Professors often blame "administrators" for institutional woes—even when those very "administrators" may well have been, just a few months before, their respected faculty

colleagues. It's as if once you cross over to running the institution, you become some evil, other character. And then, perhaps dangerously, I hear trustees, corporate executives, and policy makers repeat, as if it were factual, that "academics aren't leaders." The implication is that you need CEOs or former politicians or policy wonks to head our major institutions.

This is a problem. I do not believe universities should have to "go outside" to find leaders. Yet I see, over and over, that many institutions offer no clear pathway to leadership. And I must admit, during the eight years when I was in the central administration of my own university, as vice provost for interdisciplinary studies, at a time of tremendous innovation and growth, we would often pledge not to go to the "same six usual suspects" to lead major committees and initiatives. And then, with one option after another failing, we would return to those same overworked people yet again.

Why? First, it's a hard job. Being a good academic leader requires a mentality of change within extremely confining rules. The skills of good academic institutional leadership often do not go together in one person. Academic administration is one part parkour (being able to figure out ways to get over and around obstacles

dexterously and fast), one part chess (understanding the constricted rules and terrain available for moving each player forward in relation to other players), and one part lottery (overnight a crisis or, less frequently, a windfall can turn all your well-wrought plans upside down). Finally, administration is also one part crochet (accounting for every stitch even as you keep an eye toward creating a coherent and attractive whole).

Whatever metaphor you want to use, academic leadership requires an unusual amount of creativity and ingenuity within an unusual amount of constraint. It also requires communication skills, social skills, and, of course, a bottom line of ironclad integrity, ethics, and good will for the success of the institution and all its members (even those who spend their time grouching about "those administrators"). It's a formidable task.

Our institutions could do a better job, in structural terms, of helping to prepare faculty members for the task of institutional leadership. One way would be by recognizing, rewarding, and reinforcing the continuities between collective faculty responsibilities (such as peer review and faculty governance) and administrative, institutional leadership. We don't just shape our institutions; they also train and help to shape us and our values.

Right now, embedded in our institutional reward and recognition system is a contempt for the administrative leadership our institutions so crave. Specifically, I am thinking about the three pillars of our professional advancement: scholarship, teaching, and—way behind the others—service.

What if instead of recognizing "service" we evaluated "institutional leadership"? Service implies obeisance to an institution fixed in its requirements. Is that really a value we support? Or don't we want to recognize and reward, instead, genuine participation in the shaping of our institutions? This is not just a change in name, but a genuine rethinking of how we should recognize contributions to the democratic process informing leadership within institutions and our profession.

This idea grew out of a recent conversation I had, during a visit to Swarthmore College, with the art historian Patricia Reilly, associate provost for faculty development. Especially at a student-directed liberal-arts college, keeping a balance between institutional traditions, a changing student body, and the demands of the world students need to be prepared for requires special talents of leadership. Indeed, every institution has different but equally challenging mission-driven imperatives now. How do

we identify, support, and reward the kind of faculty leadership that is needed at all times, but especially at times of change?

We may not intend it, but by naming such contributions as "service," we are reinforcing exactly the wrong values. "Service" is typically treated almost as an afterthought and is fraught with contempt. Worse, it carries in its etymology a history of homage and servitude, servant, and even slave. No wonder in the unusually brutal, high-stakes competition known as "the tenure track" (voting people either into exile or into a relatively permanent place in our institutions), the person who excels at "service" is not the one most esteemed.

We all know plenty of colleagues who thrive in our profession even though they cannot be counted on to shoulder their share of responsibilities. We know which colleagues never read the files, write the letters, get in their readers' reports, do their jobs on committees, get in the paperwork for the grant or the panel or the website, and so forth. Yet they often are promoted into tenured positions. We know who they are and manage to work around them and, no doubt, resent their success when someone else has had to do their "service" (or, worse, "busywork").

If from the beginning we made the three pillars of our academic-reward system scholarship, teaching, and institutional leadership, it would mean changing our idea of what responsible participation in an institution and a profession entails. If we are going to champion faculty governance, we need ways of rewarding and even cultivating the talents of those who are responsible, and giving decisive, helpful feedback to those who do not measure up. As with most other things, you improve with both practice and positive reinforcement. Enacting the drudgeries of service (including doing the work left undone by irresponsible others) is exactly the opposite of contributing to the vitality of an institution or a profession, especially when difficult decisions must be made.

Finally, rewarding institutional leadership (as distinct from service) is not the same as rewarding sycophants or those who simply support the status quo. For those of us who avidly support institutional change, it is also important to make alliances with others who not only support change but are skilled at making it happen. You cannot change institutions without experience of the requirements, limits, and possibilities (parkour and crochet) of those institutions. If we rethink institutional leadership as a requirement for professional advancement, we might also help to

shape future leaders who have the capacity to transform institutions—not simply *serve* them.

Cathy N. Davidson is a professor of interdisciplinary studies at Duke University. She is the author, most recently, of Now You See It: How the Brain Science of Attention Will Transform the Way We Live, Work, and Learn (2011, Viking Press).

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GardnerCampbell • 2 days ago

Parkour, chess, lottery, crochet: these are great analogies for leadership *and* learning. Perhaps leadership and learning are two aspects of a similar cluster of commitments. Perhaps we can seek our leaders among those most conspicuously committed to learning? In any event, this is an enormously insightful and catalytic post, one to print out and frame. Bravo.

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Avatar **hastac0708** → GardnerCampbell • 2 days ago

Yes, yes. That's exactly right. Thank you so much --I hadn't made the bridge but learning and leadership really do go hand in hand.

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schultzjc • 2 days ago

Terrific essay! Faculty 'rising' through ranks into administration is perhaps the most crippling factor in developing effective institutions. That's because they aren't prepared, not because they can't lead. One way to accomplish what Dr. Davidson suggests is for universities to have a formal "succession program" that trains faculty for a change to administration. Think of it: a member of the same institution who knows what it's like to be faculty there and is prepared to manage in the same place. Awesome!

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Avatar **hastac0708** → schultzjc • 2 days ago

Yes, I agree. I hadn't thought about this before I read your excellent comment but, in fact, back when I was an assistant professor, there were lots of these programs, where junior faculty were basically "internal" as part of a teaching lead. At Michigan State, I was asked to

