

Decision Points in Academic Leadership Development as an Engaged Scholar: To Lead or Not to Lead

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Abstract

Academics have a variety of career paths available to them, yet it can be difficult to determine what career opportunities will lead to beneficial professional and personal outcomes. As engaged scholars, we seek academic leadership positions that allow us to make a difference in the world, either directly or indirectly, using our unique skills, experience, teaching, and research. To help engaged scholars determine if academic leadership opportunities are appropriate for their aspirations, this article provides career paths experienced by two engaged scholars, criteria they use to select or forgo leadership positions, and lessons they've learned as academic leaders who are also engaged scholars.

Introduction

One of the benefits of being a faculty member is the variety of potential career pathways available to us. In our experience, it is not just a linear rise up the ladder. Many of us struggle with what route to take as we explore the pathways of our career. We want to take on new challenges to learn and grow but as engaged scholars, we also want to make a difference in the world (Franz, Childers, & Sanderlin, 2012). Academic leadership roles can help meet these aspirations and in fact can provide an important multiplier effect—being able to make a difference more deeply or more widely. Sometimes taking on an academic leadership role comes from national recognition of our engaged scholarship. Leadership roles can also arise naturally due to providing a unique niche that we fit at the right time. As academics contemplate taking on new academic leadership roles there is little guidance from peers and in the literature on what criteria to use to accept or forgo leadership opportunities. This seems especially true for engaged scholars shaping their career paths. Gelson, Blanchard, Ryan, and Seifer (2012, p. 22) state, “faculty members are often left to piece together their own community engaged scholarship career development with little institutional support.” In this article we reflect on our experiences and criteria we have used to shape our academic leadership path as engaged scholars.

Academic Leadership

Definitions of “leadership” vary across higher education scholars and practitioners. Green and McDade (1994) view leadership in higher education as positions such as governing board members, presidents, senior administrators, academic deans,

administrative managers, department chairs, and faculty leaders. Bischetti (2001, p. 129) expands the definition by saying, “Leadership is not limited to a position but is rather a dynamic, fluid group process of influence that unfolds and shifts according to its members’ talents, energy, and commitment.” Other scholars define leader as a person who enables positive change (Bringle, Games, & Malloy, 1999) or a values-based process for fostering intentional change (Astin & Astin, 2000).

Academic leadership is valued for creating positive social change, a supportive environment, sustainability, reciprocal care, and shared responsibility by increasing the number of people on campus who become committed to change and effective social change agents for the common good (Astin & Astin, 2000; Bringle et al., 1999). These leaders are expected to also improve competence of individuals, reduce turnover, maximize people’s strengths, create institutional renewal, foster shared goals and common understanding, improve communication, promote pluralism, and catalyze institutional change (Green & McDade, 1994).

The difficult job of being an academic leader requires self-knowledge, authenticity and integrity, commitment, empathy and understanding of others, as well as technical knowledge (Astin & Astin, 2000). In reality, educational leaders, similar to leaders in other organizations, spend much of their time as managers of people and processes serving as a tool for change and a filter for what takes place in their educational unit (Starratt, 1996). Faculty can contribute to educational leadership through critical thinking and sharing research and scholarship that clarifies the meaning of leadership and identifies best practices for leadership and leadership education (Astin & Astin, 2000).

Several scholars have professed a need for transformative and shared leadership rather than hierarchical, directive leadership for more effective higher education (Astin & Astin, 2000; Green & McDade, 1994; Outcalt, Faris, & McMahon, 2001). Transformative educational leaders build a community less focused on competitiveness and hierarchy by pursuing meaning and social change, empowering others, experimenting with organic management, and being cognizant of the ethics of administering educational units (Astin & Astin, 2000; Starratt, 1996). This transformative work requires an interdisciplinary approach, envisioning colleges and universities as citizens, supporting perpetual learning, turning individual work into collective work, and shared leadership that is dispersed and participatory (Bringle et al., 1999; Fitzgerald, Burack, & Seifer, 2010b; Green & McDade, 2001; Outcalt et al., 2001). Transformative leadership treats leadership as a relational process and the educational unit as a social system (Hoy & Miskel, 1982; Outcalt et al., 2001).

Academic Leadership Development for Engaged Scholars

The importance of good academic leadership is clear, yet little is done to help academic leaders do their job (Green & McDade, 1994; Peters, Alter, & Schwartzbach, 2010). Academic leadership development for engaged scholars has become especially important as more universities add high level leadership positions to institutionalize civic engagement (Research University Civic Engagement Network, 2007). Gelmon et al. (2012) maintain that professional development mechanisms for engaged scholars are hard to find, especially “sustained, longitudinal, multidisciplinary, experiential, and competency-based faculty development programs” (p. 22) that provide critically important networking and support. Successful academic leadership development programs also include deep conversation about leadership, reflection about common purpose, and problem solving using intellectual assets to help emerging academic leaders learn how to develop trust and become champions (Astin & Astin, 2000; Bringle et al., 1999).

Faculty often find it difficult to become leaders due to the rigid career movement system in academe (Green & McDade, 2001). A focus on quantifying faculty productivity for public accountability and a culture of faculty

individualism can also be a barrier to taking on leadership roles for engaged scholars who believe in qualitative processes, collaborative leadership, and collective work (Astin & Astin, 2000; Colebeck, 2002; Middaugh, 2001). Some engaged scholar leaders navigate this culture by aligning their work with institutional mission (Calleson, Jordan, & Seifer, 2005), sharing their intellect more widely for collective work (Lynton, 1995), or taking on leadership roles so they can shape a collaborative culture (Astin & Astin, 2000). Ellison and Eatman (2008) suggest engaged scholars have five career stages: building knowledge, developing skills, mentoring, doing scholarship, and exercising leadership. For the fifth stage they suggest public scholars take on leadership roles such as coordinating or co-coordinating programs, projects, curriculum development, and grant proposals, speaking, leading committees and national associations, and serving as chair or dean to impact academic culture.

Engaged scholars seeking leadership roles are beginning to see an increase in formal and informal professional networks and professional development opportunities to build leadership skills and support (Weerts & Sandman, 2000). National leadership development opportunities for engaged scholars include Campus Compact, Community Campus Partnerships for Health, Engaged Scholarship Conference, Imagining America, Higher Education Network for Community Engagement, International Association for Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement, and Engagement Academy for University Leaders (Fitzgerald et al., 2010b). Select universities have also successfully implemented competency and cohort-based models of professional development for engaged scholars. Best practices include conducting self-assessment, creating a personal faculty development action plan including specific goals and strategies, leadership skills development, campus dialog, faculty fellowships, learning communities, and co-editing a book (Blanchard, Strauss, & Webb, 2012; Jordan et al., 2012; Hamel-Lambert, Millesen, & Harter, 2012).

Engaged scholars are potentially natural leaders since their scholarly goals contribute to the public good and a purpose beyond themselves (Bringle et al., 1999). The principles of engaged work—fairness, justice, empowerment, participation, self-determination, and knowing the community, its constituents, and its capabilities (Clinical & Translational Science Awards Consortium, 2011)

also lead to successful transformative leadership. The values and beliefs held by engaged scholars help them exercise leadership that promotes turning individual work into collective work, social justice-centered scholarship, increased value for applied work, and rewarding applied work (Bringle et al., 1999; Fitzgerald, Burack, & Seifer, 2010a).

The literature provides some insights into being a successful academic leader and also on academic leadership development for engaged scholars. However, no literature exists on the pathways engaged scholars take on their academic leadership journeys and the criteria they use to accept or forgo academic leadership opportunities. Therefore we share our personal pathways and criteria to add to the literature and to spark research on this important topic.

Thompson's Academic Leadership Story

When I entered the academy in 2004, I was joint-appointed. My academic home was in the College of Education. I served 50 percent of my time as a tenure-track faculty member teaching in and developing a middle level teacher education program. The other 50 percent of my time was spent developing a research initiative focused on the early care, education, and health of young American Indian and Alaska Native children. It was my work with American Indian and Alaska Native young children and their care providers that launched my career in engaged scholarship. I competed for and was awarded a fellowship with the National American Indian and Alaska Native Head Start Research Center (NAIANHSRC) housed at the University of Colorado-Denver. While engaged in the work associated with this fellowship, I had the opportunity of meeting and working with Dr. Hiram Fitzgerald. This serendipitous meeting occurred as Dr. Fitzgerald served as a methodological/research advisor for the NAIANHSRC. It was Dr. Fitzgerald who introduced me to the scholarship of engagement and helped me to see that much of the work I had been doing was engaged.

As my understanding of engaged scholarship grew so did my opportunities to serve and lead. Not only did I complete my fellowship at the NAIANHSRC, but I also took the Photovoice research training I received and shared it with several colleagues; two of whom have since completed engaged research projects using the methodology I shared. I have mentored three

graduate students through the Photovoice methodological process as well. Opportunities to share research approaches as well as to lead in more traditional formats began (and continue to) present themselves once I embraced being an engaged scholar. Since that time, I have served as a disciplinary area program coordinator, an elected member of faculty senate, and co-chair of the University-wide Engaged Scholarship Committee, all of which is in addition to the traditional leadership roles faculty in my department and discipline are expected to fill. In 2015 I received tenure and took on the role of assistant department chair.

The decisions I have made impacting my career and leadership path have been significantly influenced by my background and environment. As a descendant/member of the Menominee/Mohican tribe, some of the opportunities afforded to me are offered first because I am American Indian and second because I hold a doctoral degree in education. Selecting the opportunities to serve and lead both within my ethnic and heritage group and in the universities where I have been/am employed has been a challenge as many possibilities exist in both contexts. Guidance from family, coworkers, and senior scholars has helped me determine how to shape my path as many of the opportunities I have been presented have come to me rather than me looking for them. The decision to take on or leave academic leadership positions has also been impacted by personal life events. I am the mother of four young children and place their well-being above my academic career, and have made choices to benefit my family that, in some ways, delayed my career development. I did not earn tenure officially until 2015 as I chose to stop my tenure clock for one year and then leave a position in 2011 where promotion and tenure had been granted. These choices were hard ones to make, but essential for my personal life. And they did not have a negative impact on my leadership trajectory as an engaged scholar.

Franz's Academic Leadership Story

I began my work as an academic in 1981 as an instructor of youth development with the University of Wisconsin-Extension. By 1987 I was an associate professor and in 2002 a full professor. My work focused on bringing the research of the university to the people of Wisconsin located along Lake Superior through the 4-H Youth Development Program. I served twice as a

department head of county Extension offices, a member of the faculty senate, chair of the promotion and tenure committee, and many other leadership roles in my department and discipline. In 2003 I became the associate director of the Iowa State Cooperative Extension and through that position led multi-state and national Extension initiatives and professional associations. In 2006 I accepted a position as an Extension Program development specialist at Iowa State and focused on research related to transformative learning and engaged scholarship. In 2010 I became the associate dean for Extension in the College of Human Sciences with oversight for 4-H and Extension Families programs at Iowa State University. In this role I focused on research and practice to enhance the measurement and articulation of the public value of university-community engagement and creating conditions for transformative learning. In 2014 I retired from Extension and became professor emeritus in the School of Education at Iowa State to continue to support graduate students and engaged scholarship.

My career path of taking on and leaving academic leadership positions has been deeply impacted by my environment. All the academic positions I have held were brought to my attention by peers who invited me to apply for the job. Encouragement from coworkers in each academic unit helped me move into new positions. The decision to take on or leave academic leadership positions has also been impacted by personal life events. I chose to leave my position in Iowa State for three years to gain a PhD at Cornell University because I was disappointed in the organizational decisions being made by university leadership. I wanted to specifically study leadership and other topics to directly impact Extension organizational development. I also chose to leave Extension leadership and move back to a full-time faculty appointment at Virginia Tech so I could give more attention to a family member fighting cancer. I also chose to leave my last academic leadership position so I could more fully explore my engaged scholarship and mentor and assist others in their engaged scholarship. I now serve as a consultant and volunteer helping higher education and nonprofits more effectively monitor and measure engagement and produce impactful and appropriate engaged scholarship.

Criteria for Accepting or Forgoing Academic Leadership Opportunities

As the decision to step into leadership or

out of it is a critical one, having relevant criteria to consider during this process can be incredibly helpful. I (Thompson) was struggling with the direction my career would take; I felt that I was at a turning point—having submitted my tenure and promotion to associate professor dossier and having new opportunities on the horizon—I was not sure which path I wanted to take. While attending the 2014 Engaged Scholarship Conference in Edmonton, I had the opportunity to experience Dr. Nancy Franz's presentation related to faculty development. As I sat and listened, I thought, I need to follow-up with her, she gets it.

Dr. Franz graciously agreed to continue the conversation over breakfast. The following criteria for accepting or forgoing academic leadership opportunities were generated across three broad areas of consideration (i.e., personal, professional, and institutional) during our discussion.

Personal Considerations

As Dr. Franz reminded me, before any major career decisions are acted upon, four criteria related to one's personal well-being must be considered. Will this move further ignite your professional passion? It may seem common-sense to think, will I enjoy this new opportunity? Sometimes it is important to step back, reflect and consider whether or not the move will lead to work that you will enjoy. Also, it can be important to analyze the new platform the move will place you on. Will the new position allow you to continue work that you are passionate about or will it allow you to rekindle a joy lost?

After determining if or how the new position allows for the development of professional passion, goals must be determined. How will the new opportunity and your role within it allow you to attain career goals? Will the role help you attain personal goals as well? How will the new role contribute to your overall success in the field?

Now that your passion and goals have been thought about, the next consideration relates to your values. Of utmost importance is identifying how the new leadership role will enable you to model and extend your values. On the flip side, you should also consider if or to what degree you may have to compromise your values for this role. It is not always a given that a new opportunity will align with your value system. Thus, you have to determine how much you can or cannot compromise.

The final consideration focuses specifically on you (i.e., the person considering the change). The final area of reflection rests on personal

development. You ought to spend time thinking about how the new role will challenge you and where it may lead. It is true that we cannot predict the future, but we can do our best to be prepared for it. Thus, before making a major professional transition, all of the personal implications ought to be thought out.

Professional Considerations

As engaged scholars, who we are is deeply connected to what we do and value. Therefore, when considering professional opportunities, knowing how engaged scholarship relates to the position is vital. It should be clear if or how the new role allows for the deepening and expanding of your engaged agenda. Once you know how the position aligns with your engaged orientation, you will know how to proceed and if the opportunity is relevant to you.

If the position aligns with your engaged orientation, a reflection on resources should take place next. First to consider are professional resources—are there enough resources for you to be successful in this role? If the answer is yes, then you should consider if you have the personal resources to succeed. Reflecting on resources will require an unbiased examination of your workplace, what you possess and what you will need to fulfill the position.

A final professional consideration is about your skill set. You need to know if the leadership role will allow you to use your skills in effective ways. Further, you need to think about how the role will enable you to develop or refine skills needed for your position.

Institutional Considerations

As some professional opportunities are permanent and others are temporary (e.g., interim), knowing the organization, its context and with whom you will be working is necessary. With regard to the organization, it is important to determine if the role you are considering will help improve the effectiveness of the organization. Will your new position create a more efficient work place? And, will you be more effective in the organization as a result of this leadership role? If the opportunity is a win-win, then everyone benefits. If not, you have to decide how much compromise you can tolerate to accept the opportunity.

The organizational context must also be examined. You need to ask yourself some tough questions. Can you succeed and help others

succeed in the current environment? Is your supervisor someone who can support you, your vision, and your engaged scholarship as a leader? Does the institution value and reward engaged scholarship in promotion and tenure as well as other mechanisms? Answers to these questions should be clear before considering who you might work with in the new position. In either move—into or out of leadership—colleagues make a difference. Who you will work with is a make or break decision point Dr. Franz gave several experiences where colleagues were significant influences on her decisions to move or stay put.

Consideration must be given to how the new role will allow you to build and maintain fulfilling partnerships with academics and community partners. After all, who you are working with has a tremendous impact on how you work and where that work will take you and your partners over time.

Lessons Learned and Insights on Academic Leadership Opportunities

Interpersonal relationships are critical for successful academic leadership (Diamond, 2004) and are a hallmark of engaged scholarship. The values, skills, and knowledge needed to conduct engaged scholarship, especially community-based participatory research are remarkably similar to those needed to be successful academic leaders. As such, serving in an academic leadership role provides new opportunities for engaged scholars to discover, develop, and disseminate new knowledge about engagement and their own scholarship.

We have found that consistent with research on academic leadership positions (Gelmon et al., 2012) substantive and impactful faculty leadership development often requires external funding, ongoing support, and tools. Professional organizations and their services such as the Community Campus Partnerships for Health (CCPH) (Seifer, McGinley, Blanchard, Jordan, & Gelmon, 2012) can help reduce barriers to community-engaged careers in academia. Coaching has also been an important support for engaged scholars as leaders (Franz & Weeks, 2008).

Research shows qualities of a successful scholar for leadership include integrity, perseverance, and courage (Glassick, Huber, & Maeroff, 1997). We find these leaders focus on the outcomes for the communities they work with, not just the processes or management issues related to leadership. These leaders specifically seek

positions that make a difference in the world. They are not just concerned with academic measures of funding, publications, and academic titles or power and prestige. Successful engaged leaders also serve as connectors across individuals, groups, and topics to help reveal and catalyze leadership opportunities.

Our observations of successful engaged leaders reveal that they aren't afraid to create or attempt something new. These leaders pursue positions that allow flexibility in how they are carried out so the position becomes their own and supports their needs, skills, and interests. They are not afraid to do what makes them stronger, better, and wiser professionally and personally. This vision often requires taking risks and innovation to reveal academic leadership opportunities.

Most importantly, our advice for those aspiring to be successful engaged academic leaders is to remember that family matters. It is important to do what matters for you by being true to yourself instead of holding yourself hostage to other people's expectations. Find a way to make your own path within the boundaries of higher education and seek mentors to help discover your own unique approach to academic leadership. There is no handbook on the one way to be a successful academic leader.

Summary

Academics have a variety of career paths available to them yet it can be difficult to determine what career opportunities will lead to beneficial professional and personal outcomes. As engaged scholars it is especially important to find academic leadership positions that allow us to make a difference in the world either directly or indirectly using our unique skills, experience, teaching, and research. As academic leaders who are also engaged scholars, we want to focus not just on the processes or management issues related to leadership but also the outcomes for communities we work with. To assist engaged scholars in determining if academic leadership opportunities are appropriate for their aspirations as engaged scholars, they need to consider specific personal, professional, and institutional criteria to select or forgo leadership positions and heed lessons learned by previous engaged academic leaders.

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