A Primer on Academic Leadership

Office of Organizational Leadership, University Academic Affairs

The Office of Organizational Leadership aims to build academic leadership capacity, strengthen organizational effectiveness, and cultivate a culture of continuous improvement across Rutgers University. We recognize that academic excellence in higher education requires leadership excellence. The actions, decisions, behaviors, and messages of formal and informal leaders at all levels of higher education—including those engaged in departmental leadership— are critical to the quality of academic decisions, and help to shape culture, priorities, and levels of engagement. Given the many challenges and pressures facing institutions of higher education, including Rutgers, there remains a need for preparing academic leaders to navigate these critical, complex, and often ambiguous roles.

Disciplinary and Organizational Leadership

The distinctive nature of higher education as a sector complicates the work of academic leaders and adds a layer of complexity to an already challenging set of circumstances. Academic leaders contend with multiple and sometimes seemingly incompatible organizational missions and aspirations, a broad array of diverse constituencies who often possess differing priorities and perspectives, loosely coupled and relatively autonomous operational systems and units, and traditions of academic freedom and shared governance. These circumstances combine to create significant leadership challenges within academic institutions, which are further complicated by the absence of well-defined markers of excellence and limited incentives or rewards for members of the faculty serving in these roles. The bottom line is that academic leadership is an extremely difficult undertaking, particularly for those dedicated to facilitating meaningful improvement.

The default view of leadership in academic settings often focuses on mastery of one's discipline and significant accomplishment within core mission areas—education/teaching, knowledge generation/research, outreach/public service/community engagement, and for some professional fields, clinical excellence and translational practices. Disciplinary and/or technical training provide a useful foundation for assumption of leadership roles in academic settings. In addition to the documentation provided in one's CV, another manifestation of disciplinary and/or technical excellence is to have earned distinction among one's peers and colleagues.

Viewed from this perspective, leadership in academic settings is related directly to one's disciplinary and technical knowledge, expertise, and accomplishments within a specific field, and the ability to be influential in drawing upon one's intellectual knowledge and disciplinary base. That said, the capabilities that are critical for leadership excellence within a research or technical team or center, or of an academic program, department, or institution, can be quite different than those required for individual scholarly or professional distinction. Beyond intellectual mastery of one's field, a broader way of thinking about leadership effectiveness centers on the abilities necessary for designing and implementing plans, strategies, and structures; connecting and engaging with colleagues and students; and communicating and collaborating with external constituencies to address the challenges that extend well beyond the parameters of one's area of specialty. This way of conceptualizing leadership in academic settings highlights the need to think broadly about the purposes of higher education and the dynamics of organizational excellence, and to apply these insights effectively in goal setting, outcomes assessment, and continuous improvement in one's own leadership development efforts.

One approach to leading in academic settings, then, focuses primarily on disciplinary competencies, documented scholarly accomplishments, and the skills needed in planning one's

own career to advance intellectual and professional goals. The second approach emphasizes cross-cutting, cross-disciplinary, and generic leadership capabilities that are essential to advancing excellence within any academic or administrative unit. These broader competencies are vital for facilitating the productivity and engagement of colleagues, for creating cultures of inclusion and belonging, for pursuing the larger purposes of the unit, and for building meaningful relationships with the various internal and external constituencies served by the organization, and those on which the work of the unit depends. Contrasted with disciplinary leadership, this broader set of strategic competencies can be described as organizational leadership.

Advancing Effective Academic Leadership

In much of our writing, we advance a view of leadership as a process of social influence that is accomplished through communication. More specifically, we define leadership as the design and implementation of messages, strategies, processes, and structures in pursuit of social influence. Pursuing and affecting social influence pertains to both the disciplinary and organizational approaches to leadership in higher education. A number of mechanisms are available to leaders as they engage in the formal and informal pursuit of influence. The creation and dissemination of messages through interpersonal, social, organizational, and public media represent one source of potential influence. Less obviously, a leader's tools for influence also include the strategies, processes, and structures designed and implemented to foster, facilitate, or discourage certain outcomes.

The ways in which leaders use messages to influence colleagues and shape organizational trajectories are quite straightforward, and we might consider any of the public and private venues for communication that academic leaders might turn to in helping to advance their goals. The design and implementation of organizational strategy provide another potential source of

influence for leaders. Strategies can be operationalized through the establishment of organizational plans, aspirations, priorities, values, recruitment and hiring goals, leadership targets, or new initiatives. Similarly, through the design and implementation of organizational processes—such as those related to recruitment and hiring, program design and evaluation, personnel review and recognition, the design and facilitation of meetings, embracing diversity and promoting a sense of community, advancing professional development, and the ways in which decisions are made in each of these areas—leaders have opportunities to create and embed their sense of organizational needs, priorities, and values within the operating systems of their units.

The design and implementation of organizational structures represents yet another source of potential influence and may include decisions relative to the organizational configuration of a unit, the formation of task forces and committees and the charges each receives, and the launching of new initiatives to focus on areas of a particular need. Each of these sources of leadership influence represents potential opportunities for a leader, and ideally, these individual components are linked, integrated, and mutually reinforcing. Our approach highlights the importance of mastering purposeful leadership strategies and developing a system of engagement in the pursuit of social influence.

Thinking broadly about this full range of approaches available to leaders is particularly important in higher education, where efforts to influence others may be formal but also informal, planned and unplanned, intentional and unintentional, and mandated and sometimes accidental. We regard leadership as involving both design and development—for instance, of visions, plans, goals, programs—as well as implementation and follow-through. The two facets of leadership are logically and operationally interdependent for effective leaders and successful leadership

outcomes. Brilliant plans for creative new programs do not "automatically" become adopted. Skilled leaders are adept at affecting the design/development and implementation/follow-through phases of organizational change using a combination of the available sources of influence.

Mastery of the sources of leadership influence needed to design/develop, implement, and reinforce specific visions, strategic initiatives, or directions requires leaders to be skilled in multiple dimensions. In an academic setting, some of these key dimensions include competence, communication, engagement, and collaboration. Competencies that are vital as a leader are also vital as a colleague or collaborator as leaders work with followers to define and pursue aspirations to which all are dedicated. Particularly in an academic context where shared governance and collaboration are shared values, the interdependencies between leaders and followers are especially important.

Conclusion

The voluminous literature on leadership theory and practice, and the popularity of leadership development programs—individual and organizational—are evident within higher education as in other sectors. But, as more attention is devoted to these leadership initiatives, it has become increasingly clear that the challenges of preparing better and more effective leaders and improving organizational leadership practices are formidable. No leadership program, book, or resource can be expected to dramatically reshape the behavior of a leader or the culture of a college or university. That said, translating the lessons from these programs into everyday practice can have an incremental and cumulative impact on leaders and organizations. To the extent that current leaders are positive role models for future leaders, the process becomes significantly more effective. Although none of us—even with a solid grasp of leadership concepts, a commitment to reflection practice, and the best of intentions—is able to consistently

and effectively enact leadership behaviors to meet the complex and changing situations we face, through these behaviors we can each make a difference.

More than any other single factor, the future of higher education will be determined by its leaders. In order to continue to occupy a special place in society, higher education institutions need leaders who:

- Espouse and maintain the highest standards of personal and academic integrity
- Embrace innovation and change, while being mindful of the importance of higher education's traditions, history, and enduring values
- Respect and acknowledge colleagues and predecessors and their contributions
- Demonstrate confidence in the new perspectives and possibilities they bring to their positions
- Maintain humility about the value and merits of any one person's ideas
- Pursue academic excellence and excellence in organizational practices
- Model the values embedded in our department, school, and institutional mission statements

The examples we set as leaders at the organizational level (e.g., the vision set forth in a strategic plan; the recovery plan initiated from a large-scale campus crisis; the broader systems developed for employee recruitment, selection, retention, and engagement) and the personal level (e.g., acknowledging the good work of others in public; treating faculty, staff, and students with respect and care; actively listening and participating during meetings) are extremely important in shaping the cultural fabric of our institution. These practices, in essence, become part of the "academic leadership curriculum" for future leaders at Rutgers and beyond.

As you continue to engage in academic leadership at Rutgers, we invite you to contact our Office of Organizational Leadership if we can be of any assistance. In addition to participating in our various academic leadership programs or engaging in a conversation regarding our suite of internal consultation services, you might also consult our various books, articles, and book chapters that are designed to support academic leaders at Rutgers and across higher education. The content in this primer, adapted from *A Guide for Leaders in Higher Education*, reflects our commitment to building leadership capacity by introducing concepts, strategies, and connections that can help individuals seeking to engaging in effective, inclusive, and ethical social influence.

References and Recommended OL Resources for Department Leaders

Books

- Gigliotti, R. A. (2025). *Post-crisis leadership: Resilience, renewal, and reinvention in the aftermath of disruption*. Rutgers University Press.
- Ruben, B. D. (2024). *What leaders need to know and do: A guide to becoming a better leader.* Kendall Hunt.
- Ruben, B. D., De Lisi, R., & Gigliotti, R. A. (2021). *A guide for leaders in higher education: Core concepts, competencies, and tools.* (2nd ed). Stylus.
- Ruben, B. D. & Gigliotti, R. A. (2019). *Leadership, communication, and social influence: A theory of resonance, activation, and cultivation*. Emerald.
- Gigliotti, R. A., Ruben, B. D., & Goldthwaite, C. (2017). *Leadership: Communication and social influence in personal and professional settings.* Kendall Hunt.

Articles

- Gigliotti, R. A. (2021). The impact of COVID-19 on academic department chairs: Heightened complexity, accentuated liminality, and competing perceptions of reinvention. *Innovative Higher Education, 46*(1), 429-444.
- Ruben, B. D. & Gigliotti, R. A. (2017). Are higher education institutions and their leadership needs unique? Vertical and horizontal perspectives. *Higher Education Review, 49*(3), 27-52.
- Gigliotti, R. A. & Ruben, B. D. (2017). Preparing higher education leaders: A conceptual, strategic, and operational approach. *Journal of Leadership Education, 16*(1), 96-114.
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