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Feminist Leadership: Building Nurturing Academic Communities

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American higher education currently faces "harsh realities" (Altbach, 1999). "It has been argued," according to Altbach, "that higher education's golden age - the period of strong enrollment growth, increasing research budgets, and general public support - is over" (p. 272). There is a wave of change on the horizon. "Never before have we experienced the kind of change currently rocking our society" (Zahorski & Cognard, 1999, p. 2). Preparing our academic institutions for this change "promises to be perhaps the greatest of the many challenges in the decades ahead" (p. 2). Some of the changes that currently challenge higher education include "fiscal austerity, downsizing, heavy faculty workloads, underprepared students, a growing cohort of nomadic adjunct faculty, a tenure system under fire, [and] a demand for greater accountability and productivity from a disenchanted public" (p. 2). Perhaps the greatest challenge at present is the changing face of American higher education due to the influx of new populations of students. In parts of the country, people of different nationalities, cultural identities, and races are sharing academic spaces creating hybrid identities, new languages, and new academic cultures (Association for the Study of Higher Education, 2006). Policies, institutional practices, teaching methods, methods of assessment, and leadership will all need to change to better serve constituents in these evolving academic communities.

The colleges and universities that will survive the rapid change ahead will be those that are focused on students (Zahorski & Cognard, 1999). The primary defining trait of successful universities will be "a nurturing institutional culture" (p. 9). Therefore, we need "a more strongly proactive leadership model" (p. 9). If we hope to meet the challenges of the future, we need leaders who recognize the importance of student centeredness, social justice, and equity, and who will work to transform our academic institutions into more inclusive, holistic, nurturing organizations.

Findings from my recent study of feminist leadership in higher education indicate that feminist leadership could be the key to the development of more nurturing academic communities. Feminist leaders are student centered, focused on equity, and work to build holistic environments in which all constituents can thrive (Barton, 2006; Blackmore, 1993, 1999, 2002; Strachan, 1999, 2002). Feminist leaders keep issues of gender, race, social class, ability, and sexual orientation at the forefront of what they do (Barton, 2006). They are watchful for oppressions and they work to ensure that no one is treated unfairly. It seems, based on findings from this study, that at the very least feminist leadership principles will be effective tools for higher education as we head further into the 21st Century.

In this essay, I offer some of the findings from my dissertation study. I briefly discuss the theoretical framework and the methodology, and offer a short description of feminist leadership based on research that was available prior to this study. Next, I offer some of the findings from my study that articulate how feminist leaders work to create a nurturing academic culture. Therefore, I focus only on a few of the major themes to emerge from the data. This essay offers only a sneak peek into the principles of feminist leadership, as articulated by the study participants, but urges that we begin further discussion about feminist leadership and its potential impact on academic communities.

Theoretical Framework

Unsatisfactory experiences in graduate school led me to wonder why the climate of higher education is still so unfriendly toward women, and if, therefore, we need more progressive leadership models to transform our institutions into more

responsive, caring academic communities. I decided to study feminist academic leadership to explore these questions. The writings of bell hooks (1994, 2000) were very important to me as I began this study. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994) became my inspiration and provided the theoretical framework. hooks illustrated many criticisms of the academy and discussed personal struggles with her undergraduate and graduate experiences. As I had, she found graduate school disappointing and frustrating. At the same time, she proposed that education could be enabling, that students and professors could transgress the boundaries of race, gender, and social class and could strive to become self-actualized. Above all, hooks proposed that the classroom remains a "location of possibility" (p. 207). hooks wrote,

The academy is not paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a *location of possibility*. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom. (p. 207)

I thought about the classroom as a "location of possibility" and began to wonder if the larger campus community could also be a location of possibility. Research suggests that the feminist classroom is an equitable and holistic social environment (hooks, 1994; Maher & Tetreault, 1994). Therefore, if more feminist leaders were found in academic administration and were able to enact change, I wondered if the academy could be transformed into a more nurturing social environment. Very little research existed on feminist leadership. Previous studies were based on school leadership in Australia and New Zealand (Blackmore, 1993, 1999, 2002; Strachan, 1999, 2002). In addition, education, feminism, and leadership have traditionally been examined separately. More work needed to be done. This study builds upon previous studies and enhances our understanding of feminist leadership. Ultimately, this study found that feminist leaders work toward equitable and holistic, or more nurturing, campus environments as part of their transformative social justice agenda.

Methodology

The purpose of the study was to understand feminist leadership as constructed by feminist academic administrators and to learn how feminism shapes their identity and leadership practice. The study was designed around a feminist methodological framework, and combined postmodern perspectives that conceive of experience and identity as constructed and situational. Feminist standpoint theory provided the inspiration for the study design. Standpoint feminism is based on the idea that "the world looks different depending on one's social location" (Allen, 2000, p. 178). Standpoint theory assumes women's lives provide valuable resources for criticizing prevailing knowledge claims. The feminist academic administrator's standpoint will now allow us to criticize prevailing notions of leadership, and to reconceptualize leadership using these new standpoints.

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews with seven female academic administrators who self-identified as feminists. Each participant was interviewed twice and the interviews were typically two hours long, which provided very rich, descriptive data. Content analysis was used in conjunction with the constant comparative method. The participants included African-American, European-American, and International women in their 40s and 50s who represent institutions from small, private colleges to large public universities and community colleges in the Midwest. Their titles included department chair, dean, vice provost, and academic vice president. They are identified here only by the pseudonyms they chose so as to protect their anonymity.

Research questions included the following: What is feminist leadership as constructed by self-defined feminist academic administrators? How does a feminist identity shape an academic administrator's leadership practice? What barriers or limitations does the feminist leader experience in trying to practice feminist leadership? The study revealed many interesting things. However, my purpose here is not to answer the original research questions, but rather to focus on a portion of what emerged from the data, the notion that feminist academic leaders focus on building nurturing academic communities. First, I provide a brief description of feminist leadership based on prior studies.

Feminist Leadership

Strachan (1999) is one of only a handful of feminist scholars studying feminist leadership and education. She found, through case study research, that feminist leaders in New Zealand schools worked for improved social justice and equity. They possessed a strongly held core value system, which included a commitment to being student focused, a commitment to providing a safe learning environment, and a belief in shared decision making. Strachan found that feminist school leaders embraced a wide political agenda that was not just anti-sexist, but also anti-racist and anti-violent. Study participants valued diversity and put the academic and social welfare of their students above all. Strachan (1999) wrote,

Feminist educational leadership rests on emancipatory politics which emerge from women's experiences and beliefs. Women's beliefs, values and attitudes are central (Glazer, 1991) but feminist educational leaders may not be exclusively

concerned with these. Rather, they may encompass a wider emancipatory agenda which includes issues of race, class, sexuality and differing abilities. Therefore, feminist educational leadership includes but goes beyond being woman centered and embraces a wider political agenda that is anti-racist as well as anti-sexist (Joyce, 1987; Gosetti & Rusch, 1995). That is, feminists are motivated by equity (Blackmore, 1993). Feminist educational leadership is about the 'doing of feminism' and leading in a way that challenges and changes hegemonic institutional practices (Blackmore, 1996). (p. 309)

Rosser (2003) found, in her study of feminist student affairs professionals, that feminist leaders "valued a commitment to social justice, an ethic of care, collaborative relationships, freedom from gender roles and stereotypes, [and] a commitment to empowering others." (p. 240). My findings were in keeping with these studies; however, this study expands upon previous descriptions of feminist leadership.

Findings from a Study of Feminist Academic Administrators

Many of the themes that emerged from the data articulate the transformative agenda of the feminist academic administrator. It was found that feminist leaders in higher education focus on the big picture or a broad social justice agenda as much as possible. Findings also indicate that feminist leaders work toward change and institutional transformation. They work to establish a diverse environment and one that is inclusive. The two themes discussed here are related to the development of nurturing academic communities introduced at the beginning of this essay; one is fairness, justice, and equity, and the other is community building.

Fairness, Justice, and Equity

Fairness, justice, and equity were consistent themes throughout the interviews with the seven study participants. These terms are not interchangeable, but participants used them in conjunction with one another. Feminist leadership, according to participants, is about social justice, about advocating for women and others who are marginalized, and about attending to injustices. It was known prior to this study that feminists share a passion for social justice and for equity (hooks, 1994; Maher & Tetreault, 1994; Rosser, 2003; Strachan, 1999). This study confirmed that feminist leadership is all about equity. For example, Joni said, "I think basically that looking at all of the situations I'm in, from the standpoint of justice, fairness, equal opportunity, that's definitely a way that I've been influenced by a feminist perspective." Jessie also spoke about fairness and equity together, and added that feminist leadership includes caring, and taking the personal seriously:

I'd say probably everything I do is driven by a sense of thinking about issues of equity and community building and fairness to people on the margins, whether they are women, people who are clerical staff, people with kids, people of color, foreign students, a white male student who has neither kids nor any other issues but is struggling with something else, family issues or money. I think it is taking the personal seriously.

The feminist leaders in this study are committed to equity and work to ensure that everyone is treated fairly. This is a goal that drives their leadership practice. Joni further explained that this emphasis is specifically a principle of feminist leadership:

I think someone who is a feminist is always thinking about equality, equal opportunity, and resisting oppression. .If you're a feminist, that's never far away from your thinking and if that's how you're administering, then that's what sets you apart. .You're always deconstructing what you do to make sure that there isn't any innate oppression, or there isn't some unintentional oppression that you're either supporting intensively or actually doing, however unintentionally. I think that makes the difference. If you don't have that orientation all the time, then you're administering without being feminist about it.

Several of the participants further described what differentiates feminist leadership from other constructions of leadership. Gerri explained, "I think we look at things more holistically. We look at social and political justice or injustices, and we fight against those and try to empower others as well as ourselves. That is what differentiates from male-dominated leadership." Alexa articulated the differences this way:

Because your value system is different, it is going to affect your disposition toward leadership. You can be more collaborative; you rely on your intuition; you value those things that go with being a woman but that have been marginalized traditionally. The ideology of feminism certainly has an effect on your disposition and then your leadership action or behavior. .You're doing it because it's the right thing and the good thing to do. .You're going to be more inclusive in your decision making, your problem solving, rather than in a hierarchical fashion. You're going to be more deliberative, more critical, and you're going to be more challenging as a feminist than you would otherwise.

Participants in this study believe that the feminist leader looks at things differently, more holistically. A feminist leader is

watchful for systems of oppression and is always deconstructing her surroundings. Inclusive and nurturing academic communities must have leaders who think about and work toward equity for all constituents.

Community Development

To create a sense of community, according to hooks (1994), everyone's presence and participation must be valued. Community development was a very strong theme that permeated the interviews with all of the participants. Participants shared numerous examples of how they build community in their academic environments. Joni explained,

I very much believe in relational leadership. You have to forge the connections with the people who work for and with you; you have to be willing to do a lot of vision creation that's collaborative, and I think the standard is the leader has the vision and rallies everyone around the vision. I prefer to think of vision as something that's created by the group, and also that you get what primal leadership calls a tribal kind of feeling where people feel connected and they're motivated, they're excited, and they're enthusiastic, and your own passion is something that becomes everybody's passion.

Jessie said her leadership philosophy revolves around "finding ways to help communities or collectives work better." She feels strongly about creating a supportive and pleasant work environment. Other participants agreed. Several participants said this encourages creativity among organizational members. The feminist leaders in the study see themselves as facilitators, putting structures in place to support the work of their departments, their faculty, and so on. Charlene explained,

The enterprise is all about mentoring students and mentoring faculty so that they can do great things, mentoring students' intellectual development, which to me is really why we're here. Simultaneously it's about mentoring the careers and the development of faculty and staff; trying to put into place supports so that people can be really successful. And it's not about having power and getting to make the decisions. It's about making this place a really great place for students and for staff and faculty and helping people think about the broader issues.

When there is a sense of community, according to participants, the outcome or what is generated by the group is always bigger and better than what could be accomplished by any one individual. Raja explained how she engages in group processes to begin an initiative:

My model I would say is really that of trying to inform people to the greatest extent possible with the most diverse range of ideas about an issue, and then trying to foster some dialogue about it in which everybody really has an equal opportunity, and then really sort of abiding by the decisions that the group makes. But my job as I see it is to kind of relate people and try to make their strengths work to the best possible advantage for an outcome that is bigger than any of them individually.

Alexa shared these thoughts:

It's creating this sense of we are only as good as the integration of all of us together. When we integrate all these good minds and the ideas of these fine people, we create something far better than we could ever imagine alone. It's a very generative process. If you make sure that the environment is generous, that your ideas aren't any better than hers, let's listen to all of them and find where those common threads are, it's that generous and generative spirit that is really important. The real blessing is when you're in a place where that can happen, where you can create among each other that very generous spirit that leads to a generative sort of an environment.

Findings from this study indicate that feminist leaders seek to foster the development of academic communities in which group members can be happy, healthy, and productive. Community building was a theme that permeated all of the interviews.

Thus far, I discussed two of the findings from my study of feminist leadership in higher education that suggested some of the ways that feminist leaders work toward building nurturing academic communities. I turn now to a working definition of feminist leadership that emerged from the data, and then discuss one conclusion that I believe to be the most important finding from this study.

Definition of Feminist Leadership

A fundamental objective of this study was to arrive at a working definition of feminist leadership. The definition generated by this study has a slightly different focus than previous descriptions, including the notion of building holistic academic communities and the incorporation of the feminist lens as a key component to feminist leadership, which is discussed in the next section. Based on the findings from this study of seven feminist academic administrators, I propose the following definition:

Leadership from a feminist standpoint is informed by the power of the feminist lens, which enables the feminist leader to identify injustices and oppressions and inspires her to facilitate the development of more inclusive, holistic academic communities. Feminist leaders are motivated by fairness, justice, and equity and strive to keep issues of gender, race, social class, sexual orientation, and ability at the forefront of what they do each day. The elements particular to a feminist leadership construction include a focus on both individual or micro-level and societal or macro-level social justice concerns, a desire to bring marginalized voices to the center of the conversation, and a willingness to take risks as one strives to enact a transformative agenda. (Barton, 2006, p. 238)

I conclude this essay with one additional key finding from the study.

The Power of the Feminist Lens

Perhaps the most important finding to come out of this study is what can be called the power of the feminist lens. This seems to be the feature that distinguishes feminist leaders from leaders with a different orientation. Melissa explained how the feminist lens gives her a different perspective:

It's a political way of thinking. It's also a social way of thinking. And it's very much an academic way of thinking. It's going into any situation, whether it's working on your own research, or whether it's sitting in a meeting and understanding that because you're a woman, because you've had a set of experiences that have come to you and affected you in certain ways because you're a woman, that your reactions, your perceptions and the way you are treated are going to be very different from the male norm.

All of the participants gave examples of how they approach their surroundings and their work, and that is through a feminist lens. The feminist lens is like radar or a set of antennae, both metaphors having been offered by participants, that the feminist administrator uses to continuously scope out her surroundings and gather information. Feminists use this sensory input to identify issues of oppression and to make sure no one within their purview is treated unfairly. Joni said,

It's a deconstruction that is automatic; immediately when I'm scoping something out, I will begin to deconstruct it to be sure that there isn't anything going on there that I don't want to either be part of or be doing myself. It's like a self-reflection really, and a thinking about what you're doing in a very intentional way and a very analytic way. I'm thinking, "OK, now what am I doing, why did I do it, how might it play out, what are some problems that could result in any of these that would adversely affect women?"

In using the power of this lens, feminist leaders focus not only on their immediate surroundings, at the personal, group, or institutional level, but are also cognizant of what is happening in society at large. They are attuned to issues of oppression on both microcosmic and macrocosmic levels. For instance, Gerri shared these observations:

It's almost scary. We have a very conservative government and I see things going backwards. A lot of social and political things are going backwards. The gains that were made in years past, as it relates to women and people of color and other vulnerable groups, we're going to see ourselves on a slippery slope sliding backwards unless action is taken. It seems like the worst I've seen. So, I'm just wondering the impact all this is going to have. You see the workforce deteriorating, so that means that those persons in power, especially the men, are going to make sure they stay in power. What happens to women when they try to climb that ladder? I think all that is a threat to feminist leadership and females in the workplace.

Feminist leaders are conscious of both individual issues and concerns (micro-level) and societal issues and concerns (macro-level) and try to do a delicate balancing act as they participate in feminist activism on both levels. At a college or university, this means that a feminist leader is concerned for individual students, faculty and staff, whole academic communities, and also how to best serve the community or town in which the institution is located. This awareness that comes from the feminist lens should be recognized as an asset to an academic community. A feminist leader possesses a core set of values, or a feminist ethic. A feminist leader, as illustrated by study participants, is always attuned to issues of fairness and is always deconstructing her surroundings to identify oppressions. She is always focused on a broad social justice agenda.

Implications

I have provided only a snapshot of the findings from a larger study of feminist leadership in American higher education. However, it should be evident even from a brief discussion of the findings that feminist academic administrators work toward equitable and holistic social arrangements and that their work could be instrumental to developing more nurturing higher education organizations. It must be noted, however, that institutional transformation is not a simple task. Existing organizational structures prevent academic communities from becoming holistic, nurturing ones

overnight. Some feminist scholars argue that complete transformation is not even possible within existing institutional structures. The seven participants in this study continue to work toward change, despite the barriers and the risks.

hooks (1994) proposed that the feminist classroom is a "location of possibility." I propose that colleges and universities should take feminist pedagogical principles under consideration and work to create and sustain more nurturing organizational cultures. Findings from this study suggest that feminist academic leaders work toward that goal. Therefore, I hope this study begins to facilitate an open dialogue among university administrators about how to develop more nurturing academic communities.

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