

A Road Map for Leadership

Why women's studies needs the sort of course this author teaches

BY KARON JOLNA

WHEN WOMEN'S STUDIES was created as a curriculum in universities across the U.S. in the late 1960s and early 1970s, "leadership"—the art and science of motivating and managing people and organizations—was not considered a relevant topic. Why? Because women were mostly absent in leadership positions—from politics to business, from media to science, from higher education to nonprofit organizations.

Now, 40 years later, women have led the U.S. Department of State, the House of Representatives and major universities. Women serve on the Supreme Court, anchor the evening news and run businesses as never before. Yet only a handful of the more than 650 women's studies programs at colleges and universities in the U.S. provide practical and theoretical knowledge necessary for the next generation to make a significant impact on their communities and world.

In part, leadership has been an uncomfortable subject for feminists. It still carries baggage: a negative association with male leadership attributes such as power, elitism, individualism, Western imperialism and corporate authority. Beyond that, women's studies—along with most disciplines in the social sciences—tends to relegate the study of leadership elsewhere: to professional schools, management education, continuing education and student-life centers. Leadership is usually not considered academic or

theoretical enough for undergraduate curricula.

But, in fact, women's studies is a perfect place to study leadership, since it's a discipline that prides itself on linking theory to practice and social change, as well as applying the "intersectional" lenses of race, class and gender to the study of women. And the topic is one critical to feminist scholarship, as we need to analyze and teach about the lack of more significant progress for women as leaders in government, business and academia; how women can gain access to powerful positions; and the affirmative difference that women's leadership makes.

Indeed, research bears out the latter. For example, a study by the Center for American Women in Politics at Rutgers (CAWP) finds that women in Congress and state legislatures are more likely than men to design and support public policy that address the broad range of women's issues, from immigration and health-care reform to reproductive and human rights. And a recent report by Catalyst, a nonprofit that works to advance women in business, found that having more women in business leadership is good for the bottom line: "Companies with the highest average representation of women on their top management teams financially outperformed companies with the lowest average representation of women on their top management teams."

Feminist inquiry into leadership

challenges the common myths and stereotypes that work to keep women "in their place," and can explain why some women lead no better than traditional male leaders and, even worse, assert power at the expense of other women. For one thing, research suggests that the willingness and ability of women leaders to support women's issues is dependent on having enough women in significant roles. Linda Tarr-Whelan, author of *Women Lead the Way*, suggests that the tipping point is reached when women hit 30 percent of leadership positions in an institution: "This has proved to be the critical mass in any group of decision makers, the tipping point at which women's voices resonate fully to add the affirmative difference of our experience and values."

Those of us who teach women's studies, I believe, have a responsibility to ask the tough questions about women in leadership, while at the same time preparing our students to lead—and to lead with honesty, empathy, respect and courage. As feminist pioneer Charlotte Bunch, director of Rutgers' Center for Women's Global Leadership, writes, "Women at this moment in history bring new perspectives and values to the table that can revitalize and transform debates and options in a globe that is threatened with self-destruction based on past—predominantly male—leadership." We need to teach young women how to recognize and confront sexism, racism, heterosexism and other forms of discrimination.



Rep. Linda Sanchez (D-Calif.), in black suit, meets with the author's (back row, second from right) "Women and Leadership" students.

We need to inform them how to champion diversity, navigate change and be mentors to colleagues and successors.

That's why I developed a "Women and Leadership" course at UCLA's Department of Women's Studies. The class integrates feminist theory and practical skills, along with providing exposure to real-world women leaders from diverse fields such as the media, business, government, professional sports and feminist organizations.

The discussion of feminism and leadership go hand in glove: Young women should be prepared to overcome the obstacles faced by their predecessors and to appreciate the thoughtful work of feminist scholars as they learn to motivate, inspire and influence others. Even for those who don't aspire to be leaders, the study of leadership helps them understand how to "lead" their own lives, support other leaders and be effective members of groups and communities. After all, leadership, as defined by feminist leadership scholars Alice Eagly and Linda Carli, is about encouraging people to set aside narrow self-interest in order to foster the progress of a group, organization or nation to achieve its goals.

My course at UCLA involves three main areas of study:

- **Leadership theory:** I draw lessons from women's studies and leadership scholarship, including recent publications such as Eagly and Carli's *Through the Labyrinth: The Truth About How Women Become Leaders* and the anthology *Leading the Way: Young Women's Activism for Social Change*, edited by Mary Trigg from Rutgers' Institute for Women's Leadership.
- **Practical knowledge:** The class meets diverse women leaders whose real-life stories teach the "how" of leadership and who may, in some cases, provide networking or mentorship.
- **Action exercises:** Students write personal mission and vision statements; learn to communicate and motivate more effectively through public speaking, writing and activism; and conduct interviews with women leaders they admire and consider role models.

Some students have described the guest speakers and the mentor relationships that developed as "life-changing." Take Gabrielle Thomas, an African American women's studies major from Los Angeles who entered

her final undergraduate year with a vision for her future that was about to get bigger. In her personal mission statement she wrote, "I am most excited about meeting and interviewing a woman in leadership who I pray will remain a mentor for years to come." That mentor turned out to be an African American executive from a Fortune 500 corporation, who encouraged Thomas to apply to Harvard University's masters in education program. Today, studying at Harvard, Thomas is setting her sights on a career in social work for at-risk youth in Los Angeles.

We cannot just continue to allow our women students to graduate from our universities and stumble into the workplace—where, in the U.S., they now hold the majority of jobs—nor our men students to remain unaware of the barriers to workplace and organizational equity. We need to make women's leadership a part of the curricula for our students. Not to do so is a serious omission that will have an impact on generations to come. ■

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