Learning to Lead: A Shift from Faculty to Academic Leadership

Apeksha Mewani[1], Collette M Brown[2] & Elgloria Harrison[3]

[1] Assistant Professor, Health Equity, Administration and Technology, Lehman College, CUNY, USA

[2] Chair, Health Equity, Administration and Technology, Lehman College, CUNY, USA

[3] Dean, School of Health Sciences, Human Services, and Nursing, Lehman College, CUNY, USA

Correspondence: Apeksha Mewani, Assistant Professor, Health Equity, Administration and Technology; Lehman College, CUNY, USA. E-mail: APEKSHA.MEWANI@lehman.cuny.edu

Abstract

Academic leadership usually involves senior faculty members. Typically, junior faculty are shielded from higher level responsibilities given the need to progress in their teaching, scholarship, and service; but in some instances, the department needs and limited faculty make it necessary to step into leadership positions. This paper employs an autoethnographic approach of members of an academic leadership team, leveraging personal narratives and institutional experiences to explore the complexities of academic leadership at a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI). Autoethnography allows for a reflective examination of leadership development within the context of institutional structures, faculty responsibilities, and student engagement. We learned that the role of leadership is a multifaceted approach, and leaders must balance several moving parts simultaneously. Effective leaders must possess certain leadership qualities and need support from several sources. This experience will inform future leaders of their expectations when they assume leadership roles in higher education.

Keywords: Academic leadership, faculty, Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), higher education

1. Introduction

We are reminded of Northhouse (2022) 21st century definition of leadership- "a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (p. 6). As faculty, we might not consider leadership position, however, when the opportunity presents itself, we contemplate whether we are capable of being true leaders: to influence others, listen attentively and make decisions, communicate at all levels, be transparent, and make tough decisions that benefit the organization Learning to lead is as much about personal growth in leadership as it is about mastering the role as part of the leadership team in the department. The leap into a leadership role requires the adoption of a leadership style, understanding the administrative processes, curriculum development, Artificial Intelligence (AI), adopting technology, and student engagement.

The current research is rich with evidence of colleges and universities diversifying faculty, and faculty taking on leadership roles. However, the literature is also complete with the struggles these faculty have in achieving promotion and tenure (Calvert et al., 2025; Dyer & Carter-Dyer, 2025; Malone & Ford, 2025). This was evident at our current institution, where a college climate survey was conducted, showing an increase in the number of faculty of color, along with similar concerns regarding the amount of service assigned to faculty of color (Dole et al., 2025). In many universities, tenure-track faculty must balance teaching, research or scholarship, and service, which are requirements for promotion and tenure (Persaud, 2024). Assuming a leadership role is considered service, we argue that while service is required and can be overwhelming, it can offer faculty members a broader understanding of higher education, depending on the department, the services needed, and the support received. Leadership roles such as program director or department chairperson, provide an opportunity to know the academic department and the external departments that supports students in their academic trajectory.

2. The Case: A Hispanic-Serving Institution in the Northeastern United States

We have had the privilege of working at a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) in the Northeastern United States. This institution is nationally recognized for its commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Many of our students are first-generation college attendees and come from households earning below the poverty level (citations needed). The opportunity to serve in this academic environment has deepened our understanding of leadership and student advocacy. With a deep-rooted commitment to fostering equity, inclusion, and social justice, this HSI engages in initiatives that empower its students and elevate underrepresented voices within the academic community. Our journey aligns with this HSI, and below we illustrate how we have managed the leadership positions and, in the process, have reaped significant benefits from the experience.

2.1 Building Capacity to Lead

As new members of this HSI community, one of the most significant aspects of this role has been understanding the college's administrative structure and the role of leadership. Engaging with numerous committees, including those focused on curriculum changes through the college governance structure, and negotiating with peers on the senate floor, has provided an in-depth understanding of leadership and governance in higher education. These committees play a vital role in shaping the academic experience for students, and our participation in these committees has deepened our appreciation for collaborative decision-making. As faculty from diverse backgrounds, our unique perspectives enrich these discussions, emphasizing the importance of diversity and equity in our academic policies and practices.

Professional development is a critical component of confidence building in this new role. Transitioning from an individual contributor to a leadership position requires developing skills in conflict resolution among students and faculty, decision-making, and building relationships across the college. Our diverse experiences have informed our approach to leadership, allowing us to advocate for inclusive practices that consider diverse backgrounds and perspectives. This shift in perspective and responsibility represents a significant opportunity for professional growth.

2.2 Building Acumen in Administrative Processes

The role of leaders requires us to wear several hats simultaneously to lead effectively at scale and scope. We wear the hat of a beacon, an architect, and a catalyst. As a beacon, we have to develop and communicate direction for faculty. As an architect, we have to make decisions that align faculty with the systems, structure, and the culture of the college. As a catalyst, we must act as change agents within our department, school, and college. Therefore, as leaders we are navigating complex administrative processes while balancing teaching responsibilities and overseeing student programs. We are also managing resources effectively within the program, preparing budgets, managing personnel, and promoting faculty, staff and student development. Navigating these roles often require a focus on improving the department and the faculty; however, leaders must also develop themselves personally to assume greater responsibilities. In developing our leadership skills, we recognize the importance of learning the college and university's history, it's policies and procedures, the nuances of the college culture, and the various administrative processes. Equally important is developing our skills in the various communication techniques designed to reach the various stakeholders across the academic landscape. This process of acculturation takes time and requires patience and persistence, particularly for someone coming from a different educational system.

2.3 Building Acumen in Curriculum Development

Curriculum development plays a central role in ensuring that an academic program remains relevant and effective in preparing students for their future careers. More institutions are recognizing the importance of varying their curricula to include a wide range of perspectives and experiences (Banks, 2022). Gay (2021) mentions that when teaching is culturally responsive and courses reflect diverse viewpoints, students, especially those from underrepresented backgrounds, become more engaged and are more likely to stick with their studies. A wide-ranging curriculum also brings in an interdisciplinary element, that blends global viewpoints and the latest technological skills. Research shows that inclusive curricula can lead to better critical thinking and social awareness among students (Ladson-Billings, 2023). Nonetheless, there are still hurdles to overcome; many faculty members might hesitate to update traditional courses because they feel overwhelmed or aren't fully trained in these new approaches. In our own observations as leaders, we recognized how crucially important it is to make diversity a part of the education journey for students and to support faculty with professional development to create inclusive syllabi.

The role of the academic leadership influence can be seen in several key areas:

(1) Curriculum Review and Revision: Regularly assessing the existing curriculum helps to identify outdated materials or methodologies. This collaborative process ensures that the curriculum aligns with current educational standards and meets the needs of students.

(2) Incorporating Industry Trends: The leaders' ability to stay informed about the latest trends in the industry allows them to integrate contemporary practices and knowledge into the curriculum. For example, implementing a new technology that is used in classrooms, such as EHR Go, which gives students hands on experience with Electronic Health Record (EHR) systems and makes them more competitive for employment. Additionally, the role also entails creating and running professional development workshops designed to improve digital literacy and soft skills among underrepresented undergraduate students at a Minority-Serving Institution (Mewani et al., 2025).

(3) Emerging Technologies: As technology evolves rapidly, integrating these advancements into course content is essential. For example, the use of digital tools such as EHR Go, an EHR simulation software embedded within a program's curriculum, ensures students are proficient in the technologies they will encounter in the workplace.

(4) Development of New Courses or Specialization: The leadership team have identified gaps in the current curriculum, recognized areas of growing interest and spearheaded these initiatives or modified existing ones. This serves as one of the more creative aspects of the job. Using a mixed-methods approach, Mewani et al., (2025) found that students who participated in a workshop specifically designed to meet students' needs, reported increased confidence and effectiveness in using tools like Grammarly, Excel, and LinkedIn, as well as enhanced communication, problem-solving, and resume-building skills.

(5) Faculty Growth and Development: Modeling transparent behaviors demonstrates our commitment of our shared vision to our colleagues and visible evidence to our own professional growth and departmental success. This includes It is particularly in our role to mentor junior faculty and staff, assist in identifying and writing grants, working with them on projects and scholarly papers, finding meaningful service opportunities, and helping them to become experts in their field.

(6) Quality Assurance: Through ongoing curriculum assessment and revision, the leaders play a critical role in maintaining the quality of education. This can involve ensuring that learning outcomes are met, aligning assessments with industry standards, and regularly soliciting feedback from students and employers. Overall, our proactive approach to curriculum development ensures that the academic program not only meets current educational requirements but also prepares students for the dynamic and competitive nature of the workforce.

2.4 Refining Acumen in Technology

With the rise of virtual learning environments, students now enjoy greater flexibility and access to a wide range of resources (Berezi, 2025). However, it's important to recognize that online education needs to be thoughtfully designed to keep students involved as they sometimes encounter feelings of isolation (Liu and Lin, 2024). Incorporating technology like virtual reality and gamification has shown promise in boosting student involvement and understanding, especially when tackling complex topics (Mewani et al., 2025; Li et al. 2023; Baah et al. 2024).

Technology adoption plays a vital role in the transition and transformation of department efficiency to serve a large student body. This HSI has invested substantially in the various software systems to ease the administrative burdens of advising using Navigate 360 (Lehman College, n.d.), admission and transfer evaluation using the TREX system (City University of New York (CUNY) Transfer Explorer, n.d.) enrollment using CUNYfirst (CUNY, 2025), and transcript review and course sequencing using Degree Works (Lehman College, 2024). The adoption of multiple software systems in program management presents a complex technological landscape for the new faculty, regardless of their role. Each of these systems is interconnected to provide faculty with a holistic view of the total student. More importantly, these integrated systems provide academic leaders with comprehensive student enrollment data. Moreover, once students are admitted to the department, students and faculty are involved in the instructional platform, called the Learning Management System (LMS), and the department leadership is tasked with scheduling of the courses on an internal platform called CourseDog.

This interconnectedness requires synthesizing information across platforms, troubleshooting cross-system issues, and making informed decisions based on data from multiple sources. Moreover, the learning curve is steepened by the need to simultaneously adapt to new administrative responsibilities while becoming proficient in these technical tools. This technological immersion demands patience, adaptability, and a willingness to continuously learn, as software updates and evolving institutional needs require ongoing skill development and adaptation.

One of the more interesting aspects of such roles is the involvement in outside regulatory agencies. Understanding the regulatory framework governing academic programs has enabled us to contribute meaningfully to policy discussions and ensure that program operations align with institutional standards. This knowledge has been particularly valuable in maintaining our department's Association of University Programs in Health Administration (AUPHA) membership.

2.5 Building Mentoring Skills

Student support and communications are crucial aspects of the faculty and administrators' role at the college level. An administrator plays a vital role in ensuring that mentorship of students is intentional, structured, and supported by institutional resources. Student engagement with faculty plays a vital role in ensuring academic success and helping students stay in school (Chen et al., 2023; Li and Xue, 2023; Prananto et al., 2025). Effective mentorship has positive impacts on retention and graduation rates, wellness, academic performance (Hill et al., 2022, Le et al., 2024; Ashbrook, 2024), influence a student's commitment to their studies (Walzer, 2025), and overall student outcomes. To assure successful mentorship, administrators promote an environment for meaningful faculty-student engagement (through office hours, workshops, research), provide training and resources to faculty (equipping them with the skills for advising and mentoring), establishing clear expectations, and creating structures for accountability. Faculty members are responsible for advising current and incoming students on academic and career paths, responding to inquiries from prospective students, developing support systems for student success and retention, and organizing orientation programs and informational sessions. This direct engagement with students on a large scale is a skill that is rarely taught in graduate school, and thus a new experience that requires strong interpersonal and communication skills. Research suggests that when students feel supported, they are more likely to be retained and achieve academic success (van Lamoen et al., 2025). The department provides many opportunities to practice mentoring skills with a large and diverse student population. Ongoing research is focused on developing inclusive engagement strategies that cater to the diverse needs and backgrounds of all students (Parenrengi et al., 2025).

2.6 Leadership in Higher Education

Leadership roles in academia are not restricted to administrative positions. Faculty members today are expected to go beyond research and teaching, taking on roles that require strategic planning, strategic management, vision, and collaboration. For many professors whose training focuses mainly on research, transitioning into administrative positions can be daunting, especially as they try to balance administrative duties with their research and teaching responsibilities, with other service responsibilities. The journey into leadership can be especially challenging for immigrant faculty members, who face unique obstacles that go beyond the typical demands of academia. These challenges often stem from institutional policies, social biases, and structural inequities, making it tougher for non-native faculty to find their footing in predominantly Western academic contexts (Brissett et al., 2024). Although research suggests that mentorship and tailored professional development programs are crucial for helping immigrant faculty navigate these hurdles, such support is often lacking (Bailey et al., 2024). These faculty members often find themselves needing to develop new managerial and leadership skills to fit within the western academic landscape. Bolman and Gallos (2021) highlight how important adaptive leadership is for navigating the complexities of institutional governance, faculty relationships, and student engagement. Interestingly, research shows that being an effective academic leader transcends one's expertise in a particular subject; it also involves emotional intelligence, strategic planning, and the ability to collaborate with others (Kezar & Holcombe, 2022). Kouzes and Posner (2021) emphasize that faculty leaders who embrace transformational leadership by inspiring a shared vision and empowering their colleagues, tend to create more positive academic environments.

3. Administrative Processes in Higher Education

Administrative roles in higher education encompass a range of vital tasks, such as scheduling classes, implementing policies, supporting faculty, and managing student affairs. However, many faculty members find themselves unprepared for these responsibilities, which demands a solid understanding of how institutions operate and make decisions (Gmelch & Buller, 2023). Successful administrative leadership in academia hinges on effective communication, shared governance, collaboration, strategic resource management, adaptability, innovation, and the ability to resolve conflicts. Faculty transitioning into administrative positions often face challenges in balancing their workload, as additional service obligations can overshadow ongoing research commitments. Moreover, with the rise of technology, many institutions are turning to digital tools to enhance their administrative processes through data-driven decisions. This shift towards evidence-based management is transforming how institutions track student success, faculty productivity, and overall performance ((Khairullah et al., 2025; Bryson, 2025).

The adoption of technology in higher education has reshaped learning in remarkable ways, enhancing personalized experiences, boosting administrative efficiency, and increasing student engagement. Tools like AI, LMS, virtual teaching assistants, and digital collaboration platforms have become vital, offering real-time feedback and flexible learning options that support better student outcomes ((Khairullah et al., 2025; Alzhanova, 2025). However, it's important to recognize that this shift brings with it challenges, particularly around issues of academic integrity, data privacy, and accessibility to these resources (Guizani et al., 2025). Digital tools, such as AI-powered platforms and online assessment technologies, can be particularly effective in bridging learning gaps, especially for students in remote education settings, yet institutions need to tackle ethical concerns, including algorithmic bias and equitable access to technology. Additionally, to fully harness the potential of these advancements, faculty training and strong institutional support are critical in areas like curriculum development and student engagement (Aurpa et al., 2025). Although technological innovations present exciting opportunities, they should be thoughtfully integrated to enhance educational goals rather than replace traditional teaching methods.

4. Institutional and Departmental Support

The work of successful leaders cannot be achieved by leaders themselves. Their effectiveness is contingent on institutional support and resources, managerial guidance, peer collaboration, and the contributions of their supervised faculty and staff. The role of managing an extensive academic program has required adaptability, strategic thinking, and the ability to navigate complex institutional priorities. Advocating for program needs, collaborating with faculty, and working closely with administration have strengthened our leadership capacity and expanded our perspectives on how higher education functions as an interconnected system. Mentorship from other program directors, chairs, and deans have been invaluable, offering guidance, fostering collaboration, and providing insights into how institutional priorities and decisions are shaped. In addition, our peers have been instrumental in providing guidance and support that is needed to conduct daily activities to improve the operation of the department and the students that we serve. These experiences, spanning leadership growth, administrative processes, curriculum innovation, technology integration, and student engagement, have not only enriched our professional skills but have also given us a clear sense of purpose as educators and leaders.

5. Conclusion

Academic leadership encompasses a multifaceted approach to advance the institution's mission and vision, while developing an environment that supports faculty, staff, and students. Effective leadership necessitates the need to wear several hats as a beacon, an architect, and as an innovator and change agent. The journey into academic leadership of a major program at an HSI has been dynamic and fulfilling. As faculty members from diverse backgrounds, these roles have provided both challenges and opportunities to appreciate the complexities of higher education through the lens of diversity, equity, and inclusion. These experiences have increased our confidence as leaders, expanded our professional relationships, and enhanced our abilities to navigate the interconnected systems that support student success. In sum, as academic leaders, we are able to align institutional processes with faculty development, ensuring that faculty, staff, and students are equipped to advance the mission and vision of the institution.

References

Alzhanova, A. Y. (2025). Integration of artificial intelligence in higher education: Opportunities and challenges. *Endless Light in Science*. Retrieved from https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/integration-of-artificial-intelligence-in-higher-education-opportunities-and-challenges

Ashbrook, J. (2024). *Education dynamics: Transform enrollment with mentorship*. https://www.educationdynamics.com/transform-enrollment-mentorship/

Aurpa, T. T., Apu, M. S. H., & Habib, M. A. (2025). *Noirbettik: A reading comprehension-based multiple-choice question answering dataset in Bangla language*. Data in Brief. Retrieved from ScienceDirect. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dib.2025.111395

Baah, C., Govender, I., & Subramaniam, P. R. (2024). Enhancing Learning Engagement: A Study on Gamification's Influence on Motivation and Cognitive Load. *Education Sciences*, *14*(10), 1115. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14101115

Bailey, E. K., Brissett, N. O. M., & Bailey, C. Y. (2024). *Minority voices from the academic superstructure*. Books.google.com. Retrieved from Google Books. https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-6684-9909-2

Banks, J. A. (2022). *Cultural diversity and education: Foundations, curriculum, and teaching*. Routledge.

Berezi, I. U. (2025). Virtual learning environment: Redefining higher educational delivery for efficiency and accessibility. *International Journal of Educational Management*. Retrieved from IJEDM. Retrieved from https://ijedm.com/index.php/ijedm/article/view/38

Bolman, L. G., & Gallos, J. V. (2021). *Reframing academic leadership*. Jossey-Bass.

Bourne P. E. (2022). Ten simple rules for good leadership. *PLoS computational biology, 18*(6), e1010133. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pcbi.1010133

Brissett, N. O. M., Bailey, E. K., & Bailey, C. Y. (2024). *Systemic challenges that BIPOC faculty face in higher education*. Books.google.com. Retrieved from Google Books.

Bryson, J. M. (2025). *Strategic planning for public and nonprofit organizations*. Wiley.

Calvert, W. J., Adeola, M., Isaac-Savage, E. P., & Keller, J. (2025). Black nursing faculty: Overcoming challenges on the road to earning tenure and promotion. *Journal of Professional Nursing*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.profnurs.2025.01.009

Chen, C., Bian, F., & Zhu, Y. (2023). The relationship between social support and academic engagement among university students: the chain mediating effects of life satisfaction and academic motivation. *BMC Public Health, 23*, 2368. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-023-17301-3

City University of New York. (2025). *Register for a course*. https://www.cuny.edu/academics/academic-programs/register-for-a-course/

City University of New York Transfer Explorer. (n.d.). *T-Rex*. https://explorer.cuny.edu/

Doles, M. D., Cornelius, J. T., & Doles, J. D. (2025). Inclusion, belonging, and institutional climate–overlooked factors driving diverse STEM faculty turnover? *FEBS letters*. https://doi.org/10.1002/1873-3468.70005

Dyer, W., & Carter-Dyer, W. Y. (2025). *The lived experiences of African American women in predominantly white higher education institutions in Texas and their journey to advancement to tenure*. [Doctoral dissertation, Abilene Christian University]. https://digitalcommons.acu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1883&context=etd

Gay, G. (2021). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. Teachers College Press. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429331435-16

Gmelch, W. H., & Buller, J. L. (2023). *The essential department chair: A practical handbook for academic leadership*. Wiley.

Guizani, S., Shahzad, T., & Ahmad, W. (2025). A systematic literature review to implement large language models in higher education: Issues and solutions. *Higher Education Review*. Retrieved from Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/s44217-025-00424-7

Hill, S. E. M., Ward, W. L., Seay, A., & Buzenski, J. (2022). The Nature and Evolution of the Mentoring Relationship in Academic Health Centers. *Journal of clinical psychology in medical settings, 29*(3), 557-569. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10880-022-09893-6

Kezar, A., & Holcombe, E. (2022). *Shared leadership in higher education: A framework for the future*. Stylus Publishing. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003446965-3

Khairullah, S. A., Harris, S., Jalil, H., Alshara, H. Sandhu, R. A., Ahmad, N., & Ali, M. (2025). Implementing artificial intelligence in academic and administrative processes through responsible strategic leadership in the higher education institutions. *Frontier, Education, 10*. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2025.1548104

Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, B. Z. (2021). *The leadership challenge: How to make extraordinary things happen in organizations*. Wiley.

Ladson-Billings, G. (2023). *Critical race theory in education*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003340362-16

Le, H-G., Sok, S., & Heng, K. (2024). The benefits of peer mentoring in higher education: findings from a systematic review. *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education, 31*. https://doi.org/10.47408/jldhe.vi31.1159

Lehman College. (n.d.). *Navigate*. https://lehman.edu/navigate/

Lehman College. (2024). *Degree works*. https://www.lehman.edu/registrar/degreeworks/

Li, J., & Xue, E. (2023). Dynamic interaction between student learning behaviour and learning environment: Meta-Analysis of student engagement and its influencing factors. *Behavioral Sciences (Basel, Switzerland), 13*(1), 59. https://doi.org/10.3390/bs13010059

Li, M., Ma, S., & Shi, Y. (2023). Examining the effectiveness of gamification as a tool promoting teaching and learning in educational settings: a meta-analysis. *Frontiers in Psychology, 14*, 1253549. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1253549

Liu, Q., & Lin, D. (2024). The impact of distance education on the socialization of college students in the Covid-19 era: problems in communication and impact on mental health. *BMC medical education, 24*(1), 575. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12909-024-05551-7

Malone Jr, D. E., & Ford, J. R. (2025). My brother's keeper: Two Black men navigating the tenure-track experience. *Race Ethnicity and Education, 28*(1), 95-113. https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2023.2248892

Mewani, A., Harrison, E., & Brown, C. (2025). Bridging the digital divide and soft skills: Professional development for underrepresented students at a minority-serving institution. *International Journal of Higher Education, 14*(3), 17-27. https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v14n3p17

Northhouse, P.G. (2022). *Leadership Theory & Practice 9th edition*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publishing, Washington, DC. ISBN: 9781071836149.

Parenrengi, S., Aisyah, S., & Mahande, R. D. (2025). Unlocking employability: The power of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in work-based learning engagement and motivation. *Higher Education Review*. Retrieved from Emerald. https://doi.org/10.1108/HESWBL-08-2024-0245

Persaud H. (2024). Barriers to Scholarship Among Health Profession Faculty at a Public Institution of Higher Learning. *Medical science educator, 34*(2), 413-420. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40670-024-01996-z

Prananto, K., Cahyadi, S., Lubis, F. Y., & Hinduan, Z. R. (2025). Perceived teacher support and student engagement among higher education students - a systematic literature review. *BMC psychology, 13*(1), 112. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-025-02412-w

van Lamoen, P. M., Meeuwisse, M., Hiemstra, A. M., Arends, L. R., Severiens, S. E., & Brouwer, J. (2025). The role of student background characteristics and sense of belonging in the development of peer networks at the transition to higher education. *Social Psychology of Education, 28*(1), 21. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-024-10014-4

Walzer, M. S. (2025). *Interactions between underrepresented students and STEM faculty during the COVID-19 pandemic*. https://rucore.libraries.rutgers.edu/rutgers-lib/73381/