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Emerging from critique towards liberation: A Framework in leadership education

Erica R. Wiborg
William & Mary - School of Education, erwiborg@wm.edu

Amber Manning-Ouellette

Ericka Roland

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Emerging from critique towards liberation: A Framework in leadership education

Erica R. Wiborg[1] ⬤ | Amber Manning-Ouellette[2] ⬤ |
Ericka Roland[3] ⬤

[1]Educational Policy, Planning, & Leadership, College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia, USA

[2]Educational Foundations, Leadership & Aviation, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma, USA

[3]Educational Leadership & Policy Studies, University of Texas at Arlington, Arlington, Texas, USA

Correspondence
Erica R. Wiborg, Educational Policy, Planning, & Leadership, College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, VA, USA.
Email: erwiborg@wm.edu

Abstract
What does liberation look like in leadership learning and education? This article offers examples for (re)imagining leadership education in program design, coordination, and assessment by centering the leadership for liberation framework and other liberatory approaches. The authors offer examples of how these frameworks serve as an entry point for college student liberatory leadership learning.

INTRODUCTION

What is liberation?

What does liberation look like in leadership education?

The above questions guide our individual and collective reflections on the relationship between leadership education and liberation. The purpose of this article is to (re)imagine leadership education program design, coordination, and assessment from a liberation practice framework. We enter this conversation through various positionalities and professional roles that influence how to (re)think college student leadership learning. As leadership educators, we have faced challenges and struggles while engaging in socially just leadership education, anti-racist work, and cultivating liberatory praxis in creating co-curricular and curricular leadership programs. As such, we offer reflections on positionality in our roles, personal lives, and this discourse.

POSITIONALITY AND REFLECTION

Amber (she/her): As a researcher, educator, mother, and friend, I come to this work through love and presence in a world that seeks to capitalize off the backs of marginalized communities of people. I believe in the power of humanizing higher education by challenging whiteness in the academy. Whiteness creates a web of abnormality for people to navigate. This web is pervasive and forces oppressive structures that limit creativity and opportunity. In my personal life and career, I accept the role of cultivating more humanization in leadership education and developing college students to name, make sense, and move out of the fog of white abnormality to a more liberated way of being and knowing. As a leadership educator and researcher, I see the pathways to liberation and strive to leverage my work as a vehicle for that change.

Ericka (she/her): I center Black feminism in my thinking and being around liberatory pedagogies and the transformative possibilities of leadership education. Questions that guide how I come to this work are, "liberation for who? And to what extent?", and "leadership education for who?" As a Black queer woman, I witness the dehumanization and fetishization of the experiences, trauma, and joy of people from marginalized communities to advance socially responsible leadership education in higher education. Consequently, I come to this work to critique structural oppression and critical hope. As a faculty member, I created curriculum for an undergraduate leadership minor rooted in critical leadership. Although I pushed some boundaries within the program design to promote students' critical awareness and analysis skills, I fell short of cultivating liberation in the classroom and student outcomes. Hence, I join this conversation as an opportunity to improve my praxis in leadership education on what is possible in leadership education when liberation is both the process and goal.

Erica (she/her): My first professional role in student affairs included coordinating leadership and social justice programming when the leadership and service department merged with the multicultural affairs department. Through that experience, and in collaboration with students, I learned student leadership development needed to be rooted in social justice values and outcomes. bell hooks (1994) was my entry point to critical and liberatory pedagogy—the theory and practice of learning that seeks to liberate from the oppressive systems that limit freedom. She helped me name that education is not politically neutral and teaching involves the spiritual growth of students. We bring our complete selves into curricular and co-curricular leadership learning spaces; selves conditioned and traumatized by white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy, which are designed to disempower and divide communities. As a straight, cisgender white woman, I began recognizing the profound responsibility, possibility, and risk in leadership learning; a topic fraught with issues of authority and power. Consequently, I began to deeply contend with my whiteness and how global white supremacy shapes the broader discourse about leadership. As such, I situate myself in a critical paradigm where liberation reminds me to imagine life without oppression or dehumanization.

As we are learning possible paths to and through liberation in leadership education, we invite you, the reader, to join in the (re)imaging of leadership education from liberatory frameworks. We define liberation as freedom *from* social, economic, political, and cultural oppression *for* all individuals/ groups to have unappeased access to resources, respect, and freedom (Shor, 1990). We situate liberation as a praxis (bridging theory to practice) tool that influences leadership education, especially in program design (e.g., curriculum development), coordination, and assessment. Leadership programs do not exist in a vacuum; rather, they are informed by white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchal higher education institutions. Therefore, leadership educators must be knowledgeable and skilled at

navigating higher education systems to create leadership programs centering on liberation. As you engage with this article, we invite you to use the following questions to guide our collective reflection: *(1) What is liberation in the current sociopolitical climate? (2) What does liberation look like in leadership education program design, coordination, and assessment? (3) What are institutional barriers and supports to the liberatory approach to leadership education? (4) How do your positionality and role in leadership education serve as barriers and supports to a liberatory approach in student leadership learning? (5) What types of learning experiences do we want students to have that are not connected to positional leadership?*

To grapple with the above questions, the leadership for liberation framework (Harper & Kezar, 2021) is discussed as a possible framework, including critiques and considerations. The authors demonstrate how to bridge theory and practice through program design, coordination, and assessment application considerations. Practical considerations are discussed with the understanding that there are multiple ways to take a liberatory approach in leadership education. This article provides a collective entry point to grappling with leadership education and liberation in practice, hoping to spark future conversations. We conclude by sharing research, assessment, and resources in implementing such an approach to program design.

LEADERSHIP FOR LIBERATION FRAMEWORK

Harper and Kezar (2021) developed the leadership for liberation framework to situate equity, equality, and justice within college student leadership learning. Scholarship by hooks (1994) and Freire (1970) grounds this framework in critical perspectives to explicitly critique uneven power dynamics that create oppression and privilege while advocating for collective liberation. Harper and Kezar (2021) critiqued leadership education models that neglect power, privilege, race and racism, white supremacy, and other '-isms.' Hence, this framework prioritizes liberation as the prospect of imagining a better world through students' understanding of how power, privilege, white supremacy, and systems of oppression are manifested to increase critical consciousness. We deeply appreciate how Harper and Kezar (2021) focused on race because "…race is one of the most insidious forms of power and oppression" (p. 2). They also grounded the leadership for liberation framework in intersectionality, recognizing how social systems are interconnected and inequality is reinforcing. This framework offered space for learning and naming the socio-historical and political contexts in which leadership as a concept was created and is maintained while also increasing liberatory consciousness to balance awareness of the dynamics of oppression and intentional practices to change the systems of oppression. To develop leadership for liberation, Harper and Kezar (2021) focused on preparing students and educators to:

- Contend with complex, interconnected systems of oppression,
- Understand how systems, structures, and cultural norms must change to address inequality,
- Account for both individual (oppressed and oppressor) and collective liberation,
- Resist traditional systems of power and dominant ways of enacting change, and
- Become less concerned with privilege and position and more concerned with liberation

The full details of the various leadership for liberation framework components are beyond the scope of this article. However, a summary of the cultural commitments, principles, competencies, characteristics, values, and concepts is provided in the table below (Table 1).

TABLE 1 Leadership for liberation framework components.

Component	Uses or Foci	Concepts
CECIL cultural commitments	Foundation of the framework; Focused on collective and individual liberation	Community; Empathy; Creativity; Inclusion; Love
Leadership for liberation principles	Guiding principles of leadership for liberation work; influenced by leaders who fought for liberation	Language & logics; training, organizing, strategizing; cosmopolitanism (no bystanders); identity consciousness; pragmatic utopianism; open & honest deliberation
Competencies and characteristics	Group or team roles needed to achieve collective and individual liberation; influenced by Bensimon and Neumann's (1993) study of college leadership	Critical thinkers; analysts; collaborative learners; interpreters; emotional monitors; advocates; friendly skeptics; liberations & task monitors
Liberation values and concepts	Values and concepts of leadership for liberation	Liberation; power & oppression acknowledgement; system challenging; storytelling; support networks; fellowship

Source: Adapted from Harper & Kezar (2021).

FRAMEWORK CRITIQUE

Liberation is focused on expanding beyond socialized understandings and behaviors that perpetuate oppressive systems and inequity (Freire, 1970). Thus, the leadership for liberation framework is essential for this expansion. It has numerous commitments, principles, roles, values, and concepts listed because of the need to cover both individual and collective liberation, which could be challenging to apply in practice. Depending on the depth of critical reflection, or knowledge of the leadership educator using the framework, it could result in misguided applications. As a result, scaffolding may be difficult, and leadership educators have choices on who is privileged in the curriculum related to the various needs of students. Further, concepts in the framework could quickly become apolitical and defined differently to delimit the liberatory possibilities because of the enduring nature of inequality. As such, Harper and Kezar (2021) prompted an inward reflection for leadership educators to consider their definitions of leadership and liberation, previous lived experiences, and identities that shape how they facilitate leadership learning. This step of leadership educators engaging in their own critical consciousness-raising is crucial; its importance cannot be overstated nor can its implementation be skipped.

Returning to the definitions presented at the start of this article, liberation from something for something, leadership educators must bring caution and pause with any claims that one framework will transform the academy. There is a paradoxical reality of implementing a loving and compassionate community within an academic grind culture that celebrates individualism and promotes the constant need to prove our worth. Tricia Hersey (2022) stated, "…liberation and oppression cannot occupy the same space" (p. 25); and since it is impossible to divorce ourselves from the academy, as we are located and moving within it as leadership educators, the authors question if this framework can only practically provide theorizing for individual enlightenment or critical consciousness-raising, rather than the collective liberation it seeks to include. Nonetheless, knowing where we are located within an institutional structure makes it possible to acknowledge the ability to pursue equity while at the same time reproducing the oppressive systems we seek to eliminate (Museus & Wang, 2022). The liberatory aims this model seeks are complicated by the time required of leadership educators to sustain the very structures we hope to eradicate.

Can we subvert structures of oppression, lessen the harm they cause, and create spaces for other possibilities that guide the implementation of leadership education (Museus & Wang, 2022)? These actions work within the confines of what is already done in leadership education and necessitate creativity in curriculum design. Creativity and imagination are required for liberation, and the current educational system and sociopolitical landscape make dreaming difficult (Hersey, 2022). Expanding beyond socialized understandings and behaviors encourages radical thinking and understanding of liberation as an embodied process for freedom. Further, leadership education has been considered a multi-, inter-, and trans-disciplinary field, yet how often do we bring new knowledge designed for different contexts that move beyond our thinking? Harper and Kezar's (2021) leadership for liberation framework offers guiding principles from scholars and leaders who work or worked for liberation, and this inclusion and emphasis is celebrated. Leadership development exists outside the formalized leadership experiences offered through universities and beyond the campus community.

APPLICATION CONSIDERATIONS FOR PROGRAM DESIGN

Leadership is not just about navigating or acting within the institutional structures of power (Taylor & Brownell, 2017), but about challenging those inequitable structures. This requires deep knowledge of the history and tactics higher education administrators employ to limit student resistance, agency, and voice, as well as naming how leadership programs were/are used to socialize and condition students into hierarchical power structures. With heightened surveillance and targeted efforts to limit or defund social justice education in higher education, we are at a time when organizing for liberation is necessary. Therefore, leadership educators should be strategic in program design, creating space for liberatory practices and learning in and outside the classroom. The components outlined in the leadership for liberation framework can be used to guide their designs.

Program structure and institutional alignment

To embrace liberation in program design requires creativity and openness or flexibility to the "traditional" way we are often trained to structure curricula (i.e., starting with targeted learning objectives, time-specific content, etc.). For leadership educators, leadership for liberation principles can provide ways to evaluate, connect, and assess the competing interests, systemic barriers, and colonized ways of thinking present at the institutional level and within program design. For example, program coordinators can solicit feedback from students to help build more culturally relevant outcomes that are used to construct co-curricular learning. Taking this further, the authors have seen the liberatory potential of partnering with students in building programs and courses, integrating their lived experiences, and deconstructing the false binary of educator and student. This includes having student coordinators who previously participated in the programs or teaching assistants shape aspects of the program or course design and can result in additional and deepened leadership development for students. It is important to consider what structures, including both development and compensation, might need to be in place for balancing the learning and labor of student engagement. Further, this framework helps identify and understand leadership educators as gatekeepers; often white individuals who control leadership programs for college students (Jenkins & Owens, 2016). Leadership educators should ask themselves reflective questions when implementing program-level learning and outcomes:

- What are other forms of knowledge and learning that may be categorized as competencies related to leadership capacity? Does this align with the competencies needed for individual and collective liberation?
- What types of experiences do we want students to have that are not connected to positional leadership roles (i.e., activism, facilitating learning for others, community-building)?
- How does the program call in students to embrace critical thinking and radical imagination? In what ways does the program ask students to think more critically about their relationship to communities?
- How can I utilize program content and outcomes to be culturally relevant to students' leadership learning?
- How do the program content and outcomes mitigate or encourage radical change?

The leadership for liberation framework includes the concept of *pragmatic utopianism*, which, "…acknowledges that transformative change can occur within our current social order and clears a utopian path made possible by our imperfect policies, practices, and institutions," (Harper & Kezar, 2021, p. 7). Thus, leadership educators have to be aware of their own tempered radical position of disrupting or challenging the system(s) they work within (Kezar et al., 2011).

For example, program coordinators should consider social order, capitalism, and classism's impact on how students gain access to leadership opportunities on their campuses and within existing programmatic structures. As a group of authors, we have observed many leadership educators navigate the tension of receiving program funding from corporate donors and potential misalignments with their values and missions. Moreover, program coordinators must combat this and take steps to minimize these tensions through initiating frequent collaborative conversations with donors, organizations, and students. This looks like (a) naming the realities of capitalism on the donor/organization's goals for the leadership program, (b) problematizing this reality and what it means for the program and organization's mission, and (c) developing collaborative outcomes with donors that center on anti-racist leadership and justice-minded lenses for college student leaders. Having relationships grounded in shared beliefs across campus can be sustaining, both for individual and programmatic needs.

Applications to curriculum and syllabus development

Reflecting and cultivating creativity as part of leadership learning encourages educators to consider radical imagination in their classrooms and content (Harper & Kezar, 2021). As described previously, this means collective construction of leadership curriculum or course syllabi in which students are viable co-constructors of the course content and design. In those cases, we move toward legitimizing knowledge not recognized in the academy, such as oral histories, familial stories of resilience, and building coalitions as a form of agency and action. For example, instead of positioning assignments around particular texts, educators can complete them with the students, reflecting on their knowledge process. In addition, centering forms of knowledge like indigenous knowledge or community action research as part of assignment components opens the possibility to more effective forms of embodiment and curiosity.

Topically, the leadership for liberation framework values and concepts of liberation, power and oppression acknowledgment, system-challenging, storytelling, support networks, and fellowship could be used to organize curriculum or programmatic priorities. These values and concepts directly link to social justice outcomes and provide a framing for

addressing race, power, and oppression in leadership. The activities that are suggested and included in Harper and Kezar's (2021) framework, organized by the values and concepts, do not shy away from naming how liberation requires dismantling systems of oppression and radical (re)imagining. As leadership educators, we emphasize one without the other is incomplete. For example, our curriculum must include imagining a world without oppression or one centered on justice, while also acknowledging how power and oppression are embedded within the curriculum and the context where it is implemented. These contradictions are challenging, and when we do not center imagining freedom, students get stuck in cynicism or pessimism regarding enacting change (Hytten & Warren, 2003). A strategy we have employed is centering successful student resistance movements as examples of how student groups have held universities and other institutional bodies accountable to their educational needs (Wiborg, 2022). These examples can reduce feelings of powerlessness in curriculum and highlight collective liberation movements in hopes of encouraging participation in shifting inequitable systems and structures.

RESEARCH AND ASSESSMENT CONSIDERATIONS

To be liberated is challenging the forced system of evaluation and assessment of academic outcomes for profit. Yet, white supremacist, patriarchal, capitalistic systems within and outside the university move leadership educators toward systems of reward and competency-based practices to appropriate funding. Within these structures, leadership educators find tension and contradictions to liberation. One form of liberatory assessment could leverage personal or collective manifestos as evaluative commitments toward critical consciousness and change. We draw from Stallings' (2020) *A Dirty South Manifesto* about reclaiming Black sexuality in the Southern United States (Mahoney, 2021). Stallings (2020) outlined the history of manifestos, noting, "Historically, manifestos have been used in a variety of ways: as inspiration for radicalizing politics, a way to share cultural insights and innovations, or as means to build and locate a communal space for new social being" (p. 6). In other words, manifestos serve as a materialization of proclaimed action and a declaration of intention that guides social change through structural inequality, thus aligning with liberatory practices.

Likewise, liberatory research and assessment align with arts-based research (ABR) and approaches such as digital storytelling, sound art, poetry, and drawing. ABR approaches open possibilities and center creativity as a form of knowledge. Savin-Baden and Wimpenny (2014) reminded us of "…research that uses the arts, in the broadest sense, to explore, understand, represent and even challenge human action and experience" (p. 1). Therefore, ABR offers a deepened approach to understanding human actions. Wang et al. (2017) posited that with this commitment to understanding human experiences, ABR is a framework that socially engaged researchers increasingly use. For example, digital storytelling offers a glimpse into the collegiate setting that may reveal the challenges students, faculty, or staff experience in leadership learning and how they navigate racialized leadership environments, thus helping to deconstruct the communities that higher education serves.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

As Harper and Kezar (2021) modeled, learning from movements and leaders who worked or continue to work for liberation is an excellent starting point for seeking more resources about liberation. Particular attention should be given to groups who coalesced and

developed a vision for freedom and a liberated world, like the Combahee River Collective (1977), and other Black liberation movements, like #BlackLivesMatter activists. We have also found the importance of building out resources locally and encouraging partnerships with library archivists, sourcing for historical student resistance measures at your institution. It is not coincidence that academic librarians are being disenfranchised because of the liberatory possibility in accessing history, documentation, and storytelling. Consider curated archival projects like *A Campus Divided: Progressives, Anticommunists, Racism, and Antisemitism at the University of Minnesota 1930–1942* (Prell, 2017). This collective historical project traces some of the larger systems of oppression that have influenced the campus. Curated collections such as this provide critically conscious examples of how history continues to implicate higher education and student lives today. To confront history is to begin reconciling the past and is part of the liberation process.

Books such as *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice* (Adams, Blumenfeld et al., 2018) and the accompanying *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice* (Adams, Bell et al., 2018) are excellent resources for increasing your literacy and knowledge of systems of oppression. In particular, sections like Bobbie Harro's (2013) *Cycle of Socialization and Cycle of Liberation* and Barbara Love's (2013) *Developing a Liberatory Consciousness* provide additional framing and considerations for liberatory leadership learning. Further, seeking professional development and communal learning spaces focused on social justice education have been sustaining our own relationships. Experiences like the Social Justice Training Institute (https://sjti.org/), the Leadership Educators Symposium (https://nclp.umd.edu/programs/leadership-educators-symposium), the White Privilege Conference (https://www.theprivilegeinstitute.com/), and the National Conference on Race & Ethnicity in Higher Education (https://ncore.ou.edu/), just to name a few, intentionally engage educators in exploring liberatory frameworks and critical perspectives.

As discussed throughout this article, liberation includes spiritual growth and resisting the grind culture that limits our capacity to imagine different possibilities. Tricia Hersey, the founder of the Nap Ministry, wrote a manifesto on how *Rest is Resistance* (2022). Returning to our positionality, and how we have experienced exhaustion in our roles in academia, we recognize the need to listen to our bodies and create space for our thinking to slow so our dreams have room to come into our consciousness. This manifesto centers on love and reminds us that our worth is not connected to production and that our liberation is a collective journey. Finally, we end with a recommendation to read and re-read bell hooks. Her books speak to liberation, and *Teaching to Transgress* (1994) theorizes about education as the practice of freedom. She writes that a new kind of education is needed, one that teaches students to transgress against racial, sexual, and class boundaries to reach the gift of freedom. This calls for raising critical questions about emotion, community, eros, pain, language, and engagement. This book is a compilation of essays and reflections on how to make classrooms of community work in hopes of transforming education as the practice of freedom across all identities. These resources are not exhaustive, and we do not present them as a form of capital, but more so as a communal list for furthering our liberatory practices.

CONCLUSION

We sought to (re)imagine using the leadership for liberation framework in program design, coordination, and assessment in leadership education. Leadership educators must create programs and courses that center liberation as freedom *from* social, economic, political, and cultural oppression *for* all individuals/groups to have unappeased access to resources, respect, and freedom. Program design and coordination disconnected from liberation will

continue to focus on individual awareness, whiteness, romanticized leadership, and temporary response to larger social issues. Harper and Kezar's (2021) leadership for liberation framework is an entry point for leadership educators to be strategic in program design and coordination, creating space for liberatory practices in and outside the classroom.

ORCID
Erica R. Wiborg https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6003-506X
Amber Manning-Ouellette https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0067-0114
Ericka Roland https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3046-8275

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Erica R. Wiborg (she/her/hers) is an assistant professor of qualitative research and higher education at William & Mary. She is a critical, qualitative scholar passionate about deconstructing systemic racism, the sociohistorical influences of race and racism, and hegemonic whiteness in postsecondary leadership learning environments. She has a background in undergraduate and graduate leadership learning, both in curricular and co-curricular leadership education and programming.

Amber Manning-Ouellette (she/her/hers) is an assistant professor of higher education and student affairs at Oklahoma State University and the college student development program coordinator. Dr Manning-Ouellette is a scholar-practitioner and worked in student affairs for over 10 years in first-year experience, leadership development, and enrollment management. She also coordinated and taught in a leadership studies program prior to her current role. Her research focuses on liberation in leadership education and anti-racist leadership learning as well as understanding postsecondary sexual health education for college students.

Ericka Roland (she/her/hers). Dr Ericka Roland's research examines the process of social justice/criticality development in postsecondary education institutions. Dr Roland has three interconnected lines of inquiry: (1) Program Development and Practices, (2) Leadership Development, and (3) Personal and Collective Development around equity and social justice. She centers the pursuit of equity in all her projects with a commitment to research and practice that cultivates transformative possibilities.