

UCLA

InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies

Title

Book Review: Enhancing Campus Capacity for Leadership by Adrianna J. Kezar and Jaime Lester

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8q80t7xc>

Journal

InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies, 10(1)

Author

Hughes, Bryce

Publication Date

2014

DOI

10.5070/D4101018842

Copyright Information

Copyright 2014 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Enhancing Campus Capacity for Leadership: An Examination of Grassroots Leaders in Higher Education by Adrianna J. Kezar and Jaime Lester. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011. 351 pp. ISBN 978-0-8047-7647-9.

Throughout the history of American higher education, students, faculty, and staff have acted as grassroots leaders, individuals who do not hold positions of authority yet pursue change within their organizations, often in ways disruptive to the status quo of their institutions (Kezar & Lester, 2011). However, as described by Kezar and Lester in the first chapter of *Enhancing Campus Capacity for Leadership: An Examination of Grassroots Leaders in Higher Education*, despite how important or necessary this organizational change may be, grassroots leadership remains underexamined in higher education and, to an extent, invisible because this work is typically in conflict with established institutional norms and procedure. The authors provide context as to why higher education grassroots leaders often feel the need to create change without attracting undue attention to avoid punitive consequences such as disciplinary action or even termination. Campus grassroots leaders have few examples or lessons to draw from when they set forth on new initiatives. Moreover, the increased corporatization and managerialism within higher education have diminished the formal power of faculty and staff by eroding shared governance structures and desiccating tenure. *Enhancing Campus Capacity for Leadership* helps give voice to important, critical work currently happening in higher education.

Adrianna Kezar and Jaime Lester set out to study grassroots leadership within six different institutional settings. At the core of their study are the narratives of grassroots leaders on each of these campuses, with which Kezar and Lester ground their analyses. Their findings illuminate these leaders' tactics and strategies, the obstacles and challenges they faced, the power dynamics and authority structures they navigated, and their sources of resilience. Kezar and Lester also conducted cross-case analysis to identify organizational differences across campus types, but found that grassroots leaders generally utilized similar tactics and strategies. Overall, they argue, as an implication of their research, increased support for grassroots leadership holds incredible potential for faculty and staff to reclaim their influence and enact lasting change.

The first section provides an overview of the study, including the authors' theoretical framework, methods, and analysis procedures. They also used this section to outline their assumptions and provide background that sets the stage for this work. Specifically, Kezar and Lester (2011) point to the abundance of research on the topic of top-down, positional leadership that pervades the higher education literature to demonstrate how this contrasts with recent work in management about shared leadership and employee participation in decision-making. While the authors do provide examples of work in education examining bottom-up leadership, they identify this area as a gap in the literature as it consists mostly of case studies or issues specific to historical moments (e.g. the civil rights movement). Additionally, Kezar and Lester (2011) include a chapter on Debra Meyerson's (2003) "tempered radicals" framework to provide for the reader a sense of how they conceptualize grassroots leaders in higher education. This frame helps the authors contextualize the differences between the grassroots leaders in their study from the type of grassroots leaders described in the social movements literature—namely, the grassroots

leaders in their study remain committed to their organizations' mission and purpose and thus "temper" their efforts in order to maintain their position within the institution.

The book is then divided into two more sections, organizing the authors' findings into the individual and organizational levels of analysis. *Individual and Group Grassroots Phenomena* is arguably the richest section of the book. Readers will want to return to this section several times as each chapter could stand alone as a research article, providing insight into the individual- and group-level issues learned from these grassroots leaders' practical wisdom. This section not only describes the strategies of grassroots leaders, but discusses common obstacles, and includes two chapters focused specifically on the power dynamics grassroots leaders encountered when striving to effect change. For example, Kezar and Lester described the efforts at one university by a group of staff members to increase access for Latina/o students. This group worked carefully to build relationships with faculty and network with others concerned with Latina/o student success on campus to navigate power dynamics, primarily institutionalized oppression.

The authors present findings within the third section specific to the organizational level of analysis. *Organizational Grassroots Phenomena, Implications, and Conclusions* is not as extensive as the second section, however, due to the low salience of organizational differences. For example, while six chapters constitute Kezar and Lester's (2011) individual-level findings, only three of the four chapters in this section present organization-level findings, including one chapter specially focused on implications from their research that pertain to the influence of academic capitalism. This section does highlight the organizational benefits of grassroots leadership to help persuade formal institutional leaders to cultivate grassroots leadership on their own campuses. Operating under the assumption that corporatization and academic capitalism are part of higher education culture, Kezar and Lester demonstrate how fostering grassroots leadership increases a campus's overall capacity for leadership by empowering campus constituents who lack access to formal channels of power. For instance, throughout the book they discuss how contingent faculty, who generally lack access to governance bodies like academic senates, could exercise influence through grassroots efforts. This section also includes recommendations for future research.

Taken together, the pragmatic focus of this book is its greatest strength. Kezar and Lester's (2011) chief audience consists of faculty and staff who are likely to be grassroots leaders on their own campuses, and the book is meant to be accessible and instructive in informing grassroots efforts. In addition, coloring their analysis with the narratives of the study participants makes the book relatable and engaging for practitioner-activists whose work is validated by this study. Finally, by including the organizational benefits of grassroots leadership, Kezar and Lester provide a compelling argument for administrators to support grassroots efforts as well, despite concerns about the institution's status quo.

However, given the way Kezar and Lester situate their work within the context of corporatization and academic capitalism, their lack of a critical focus on these issues may be the book's primary limitation. The book demonstrates corporatization in the academy has led to strengthened bureaucracies and reduced shared governance, and as a result, faculty and staff leaders have become increasingly disempowered. Kezar and Lester then argue that fostering

grassroots leadership may be a way for these constituents to reclaim power and lead efforts to bring change to campus. By taking a neutral stance on academic capitalism, however, they forego a discussion of the potential of grassroots leadership to challenge the widespread adoption of corporate values in higher education. As a result, their argument could be interpreted as a short-term solution to a much deeper systemic issue. Still, provided the purpose of this volume, a critique of academic capitalism may be better suited for a separate analysis.

Through this study, Kezar and Lester make important contributions to both leadership theory and practice. By taking a bottom-up perspective, they build onto the existing body of literature on educational leadership that examines leadership from the top-down, helping to move leadership theory away from the "leadership as position" argument toward a more constructivist approach that considers leadership as a process. In addition to validating the existing work of grassroots leaders in higher education, this study also offers an accessible framework to conceptualize their efforts. In particular, introducing the "tempered radicals" framework from the management literature to a higher education audience is one of the most helpful practical elements of this study.

Finally, this book opens up new directions for research into leadership and organizational change within higher education. Specifically, Kezar and Lester (2011) note that their data does not allow them to consider grassroots leadership from a longitudinal perspective, and thus they are unable to draw conclusions about causation between specific strategies and lasting institutional change. They are also cautious about interpreting efforts as "successful" or "unsuccessful" because many of the efforts they studied were not complete by the conclusion of the study, and they determined that assessments of success should be from the perspectives of their study participants and not those of the researchers. Instead, their participants referred to individual "successes" and "failures" within their grassroots efforts, rather than holistic assessments. While further research may demonstrate that it is essentially impossible to explicate a "formula" for successful grassroots leadership, future study could help parse out tactics, attitudes, and contextual factors that assist grassroots leaders in creating change.

Enhancing Campus Capacity for Leadership provides an accessible, practical, and timely argument for supporting the work of campus grassroots leaders. By engaging the grassroots leadership and management literatures with the narratives of faculty and staff doing this work, Kezar and Lester (2011) provide a framework for conceptualizing these efforts in a manner appropriate for the context of higher education. Most importantly, they validate the work of grassroots leaders on campus and the many ways higher education has been transformed by their efforts, offering a roadmap for future leaders as they traverse their own pathways to create change on campus.

References

Kezar, A.J., & Lester, J. (2011). *Enhancing campus capacity for leadership: An examination of grassroots leaders in higher education*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Meyerson, D.E. (2003). *Tempered radicals: How everyday leaders inspire change at work*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Reviewer

Bryce Hughes is a doctoral student in Higher Education and Organizational Change at the University of California, Los Angeles, where he also works as a Research Analyst at the Higher Education Research Institute. His research interests include campus climate, LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning) affairs, intergroup dialogue, STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) education, and the educational benefits of diversity. Prior to his doctoral program, Bryce worked as a student affairs practitioner in the areas of Diversity and Multicultural Affairs and LGBTQ Services, including establishing an LGBT Center at Gonzaga University as a campus grassroots leader. His dissertation work will also focus on how LGBTQ issues are addressed at Jesuit, Catholic universities through grassroots leadership strategies.