

“Leading from the Bottom”: Creating Change from Under Cover

Enhancing Campus Capacity for Leadership: An Examination of Grassroots Leaders in Higher Education

by Adrianna J. Kezar and Jaime Lester

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REVIEWED BY: JUDY OLSON

Rousseau said monarchy implied that rulers were as different from the ruled as shepherds from sheep: either kings were gods, he said, or men were beasts. But our country was supposed to be based on a different proposition. So for a couple of hundred years we at least pretended devotion to more egalitarian assumptions than the ones underpinning a caste society in which the wealthy are born to be educated and to rule, and the rest to follow, like Rousseau’s shepherd and sheep—or in the new language for this old idea, like the 1% and the 99%, whose sad recent bleatings seem only to underscore how thoroughly we have abandoned our brief experiment in egalitarianism. We live in a world of astronomically compensated “leaders” whose power and wealth accumulate as the rest of us rapidly become impoverished and disempowered. The professional classes are splitting; what we know is happening in academia—where legions toil in part-time or otherwise curtailed versions of academic positions, never moving along the once-normal tenure ladder—is happening similarly in law, in journalism, in medicine. Even fire-fighting jobs are increasingly part-time and temporary. While the per-

Judy Olson is a lecturer in English at California State University, Los Angeles. She is the California Faculty Association CSULA Chapter Lecturer Vice President. She is also chair of the National Education Association and California Teachers’ Association Contingent Faculty Caucuses, as well as secretary of New Faculty Majority and the New Faculty Majority Foundation.

centage of workers in positions that allow them professional and creative autonomy and full participation in their communities—ie, that allow them to exercise “leadership”—decreases alarmingly, their concentrated power increases, and the proliferating studies of leadership focus their attention on those with the greatest institutional power.

Adrianna Kezar’s work is all the more essential in this environment. The Howard Zinn of higher education leadership studies, she shines her analytical light in the places many of her colleagues ignore, finding leadership exercised in all echelons of academia. Her work on the position of contingent faculty in the academy has been an important tool for contingent faculty activists; indeed, the title of her monograph on contingent faculty, *Understanding the New Majority*, was part of the inspiration for the name of the contingent faculty advocacy organization *New Faculty Majority*. So the staid, button-down title of her recent book with Jaime Lester, *Enhancing Campus Capacity for Leadership*, turns out to be covering up, just a little bit, its stealthier subtitle: *An Examination of Grassroots Leaders in Higher Education*.

Hiding a subversive agenda under a grey suit turns out to be the strategy running through the book like a leitmotif—although I’m almost afraid to say so, lest the college administrators who make up one part of the book’s audience find out. Kezar and Lester are walking a tightrope in this book, trying to appeal to traditional “leaders” on campuses, the deans and provosts and chancellors, by showing how nurturing leadership from below can enhance their campus cultures, while also talking strategy with the agents of change who might have more subversive agendas.

In the 18th century, novelists anxious to legitimize their new genre provided their works with various apparatus of authority: Fielding freighted his novels with classical allusion, Austen graced hers with genteel respectability. This study, venturing into territory that might seem racy to the non-grassroots leaders in its audience, is likewise carefully framed, contextualized through a large number of disciplinary lenses. Kezar and Lester draw on theoretical literature about community organizing, business and government leadership, management studies, higher education administration, union organizing, faculty development, grassroots leadership studies, and more. They are working to construct a new apparatus, not exactly to study something new, but to look at the ghostly remains of something disappearing: many of the “grassroots” leaders turn out to be faculty members, who not so long ago were the people with the traditional power on campus: “a shift has taken place,” they say, “where faculty are no longer considered part of the formal leadership structure of many institutions” (14).

At the center of all the careful framing are several case studies, stories about individual members of academic communities, mostly faculty members, which the authors discuss in relation to their frames and from which the authors draw lessons. They map people’s relationships to power as “Confrontational,” “Tempered radical” and “Power as context.” The last of these is a sort of blindness to power

altogether, the opposite of the first, with “Tempered radical” clearly representing the Goldilocks right answer, the authors’ choice for disempowered people who have reason not to rock the boat too much. Indeed, the path recommended for the grassroots campus leader reminds me again of the strategies used by 18th-century women novelists staking out new territory but needing the validation of traditionally masculine institutions to do so, appealing to and flattering their authority even while subtly subverting it.

In the long run, I fear this strategy reinforces, even exacerbates, the lopsided power structure that is suffocating all of us. I do not want to accept the rapid division of our once-egalitarian and faculty-driven world into a small number of non-academic managers making all decisions for a disempowered faculty. Especially worrisome to me is the authors’ apparently approving characterization of Saul Alinsky’s pragmatic approach to organizing, applauding a “focus on action over principles.... [S]ome groups stand for ideas but never make a difference in the lives of people” (325). I worry that this approach will lead us to become hamsters running in a wheel of someone else’s creation, active but never quite getting anywhere. A manual to help campus activists achieve specific short-term goals while avoiding burnout—or job loss—is welcome, but could become another tool used to exploit people already too eager to offer free labor in their devotion to higher education. We need those short-term victories to keep going, but rather than exercising power like ‘50’s sitcom housewives who find safe corners from which to manipulate the powerful into doing their will, we should be trying to change the structures of power themselves. If we don’t keep our eyes on the horizon, then the hurrieder we go, the behinder we’ll get, as the sign taped on the wall says.

The book that would offer strategies for transforming academia into a place truly devoted to serving students and the community and humanity, empowering faculty and students alike, probably would not simultaneously appeal to many administrators currently in power, although I know there are more than a few left who retain the values and experiences of real shared governance. While I wait for that book, though, I’m glad that Adrianna Kezar and Jaime Lester are offering this thoughtful, engaging book full of stories, wise advice and hope, to sustain all of us working to make sure colleges offer the very best possible education to our students. They are perhaps at their best describing and empathizing with and, especially, validating the emotional and personal difficulties of asserting agency in a world increasingly set up to prevent it, as well as offering analytical lenses for understanding interpersonal dynamics that could otherwise be quite challenging. Give this book to an emotionally drained campus activist—or your favorite administrator. And if you find that other book, let me know. [nea](#)

