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A Review of Leading Academic Change: Vision, Strategy, Transformation

By Elaine P. Maimon. (2018). Sterling, Virginia: Stylus. 180 pages. [ISBN 9781620365670]

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Scholars in writing across the curriculum are undoubtedly familiar with Elaine Maimon. As a founder of the WAC movement, she led National Endowment for the Humanities-funded faculty workshops at Beaver College (now Arcadia University) in the 1970s, and her article “Cinderella to Hercules: Demythologizing Writing Across the Curriculum” (Maimon, 1980) names and addresses challenges in leading WAC work that remain as common today as they were three decades ago. Today, Maimon serves as President of Governors State University (GSU) in Chicago, and her newest book, *Leading Academic Change: Vision, Strategy, Transformation*, builds on her administrative experience in WAC and beyond in order to argue for the intentional, principled transformation of higher education to better serve students and society. Though *Leading Academic Change* is not specifically about WAC, it provides a glimpse into the power of WAC’s principles and the opportunities for current WAC leaders who move into other institutional leadership positions.

Maimon is not the only scholar to consider how WAC and its underlying principles can foster change, but *Leading Academic Change* offers a slightly different perspective on WAC and institutional change. Some scholars have made calls for creating an explicit theory of change for WAC work, such as Michelle Cox, Jeffrey R. Galin, and Dan Melzer’s (2018) *Sustainable WAC: A Whole Systems Approach to Launching and Developing Writing Across the Curriculum* (reviewed in this issue of *Across the Disciplines*). Others have sought to document the effects of WAC programming on teaching and learning, such as William Condon, Ellen R. Iverson, Cathryn A. Manduca, Carol Rutz, and Gudrun Willett’s (2016) study in *Faculty Development and Student*

Learning: Assessing the Connections. While these threads emphasize change, *Leading Academic Change* instead zeroes in on leading. Rather than assessing the effects of her change strategies, she instead suggests a particular vision of higher education and identifies the resulting strategies, using GSU as example rather than as evidence. Just as Maimon was an early, visible, and vocal leader of the WAC movement, she is now a visible and vocal leader in arguing for principled, vision-based leadership strategies—an area of scholarship that Thomas P. Miller and Joddy Murray (2017) say is missing from “leading journals” in the field of composition and rhetoric in their introduction to the special issue of *College English* on English and Leadership Studies.

Maimon’s book begins by reminding us that higher education is both transformative and continually undergoing transformation. The current transformation is a shift from seeing learning as the accumulation of facts, which can be easily accessed and verified, to cultivating the ability to encounter, analyze, and synthesize information in useful ways, or what Maimon refers to as “wisdom,” involving the “ability to apply knowledge effectively to new situations” (p. 2). While few in WAC work would challenge Maimon’s view, there are still many faculty and administrators who buy into transmission-based models of education that privilege recall over analysis and synthesis despite half a century of research arguing otherwise. There is no one for whom this transformed vision of education is more important than “first generation exclamation point” students—those who are the first in not only their families but also their neighborhoods to attend college. Maimon contends that American society can’t afford not to teach first generation exclamation point students how to cultivate judgment and wisdom, particularly by connecting what they’re learning in school to what they’re experiencing outside of it. Transforming higher education to meet the needs of today’s learners is critical.

For higher education to transform, however, it needs leaders like Maimon who make decisions from a place of administrative principle, moving their focus from managing to leading. Leadership “defines what the future should look like, aligns people with that vision, and inspires them to make it happen despite the obstacles” (Kotter, 2012, p. 28), and *Leading Academic Change* illustrates how Maimon accomplishes this by drawing on twelve principles of transformative leadership in her work. The book’s second chapter builds on these principles by describing how university leaders must have both “focus” and “peripheral vision” in order to effect change. Listening, intellectual mobility, and putting students’ interests first are three leadership qualities she says she first developed leading an institution-wide project from the periphery as a young, untenured composition director. These principles guided her administrative experiences from Beaver College through multiple institutions, enabling Maimon to develop a vision and cultivate strategies that helped realize that vision in unique institutional contexts. She describes the “mismatch” between vision and reality at GSU as a university that enrolled only juniors and seniors and the ways that her guiding principles helped to cultivate trust and buy-in for “being true to [GSU’s] roots” while “better fulfill[ing] its mission by

expanding its student base” (p. 20). Today, GSU offers multiple pathways to a degree, such as matriculating as a first-year student or entering through one of their guided “pathways” from area community colleges. Leading this change is the focus of her examples, and in the remaining chapters, she outlines her vision for higher education and the strategies she used to make this vision a reality at GSU in the hopes that her guiding principles can guide others to transform their own approaches to education. But university leaders who see their work as managerial may overlook the fact that Maimon’s principles are the key take-away, not the specific changes she spearheaded at GSU.

Maimon’s “students-first” mantra undergirds the discussion in each of her chapters. In chapter 3, for example, she argues that university presidents must cultivate “broad-based ownership and leadership” (p. 38) and “braid together equity and quality” (p. 39). Higher education must intentionally work to create universities that support first generation exclamation point learners in all aspects of their education. Weaving together equity and quality can ensure that individuals from all backgrounds who enroll in higher education receive a transformative, empowering experience, not just those who are able to enroll in well-funded, elite universities. In chapter 4, Maimon explains the “infusion model” as a way to help transform education. Here, she provides an overview of WAC’s history before articulating the ways that GSU infuses their curricular goals of writing, citizenship, career preparation, and the importance of “living in the midst of art” across their campus and curriculum because integrated approaches are more effective at cultivating ways to meet these goals than a single course can be.

Chapter 5 argues that more attention needs to be paid to foundation-level courses. In most universities, these are likely to be taught by contingent and precarious faculty; at GSU, these courses are taught by full-time faculty because foundational courses present an “intellectual challenge” that both requires and is deserving of experts’ attention. Maimon’s intention here isn’t to disparage adjunct faculty, but instead to motivate university administrators to invest funding in foundational courses rather than treating them as requirements students need to “get out of the way” that can be taught by unsupported and overburdened part-time teachers. This investment in foundational courses also breaks down academic hierarchies that position the teaching of graduate and upper division courses as more important than first-year courses. Maimon also argues that doctoral training should encourage specialist knowledge as well as “flexibility and connected thinking of the generalist,” suggesting that “Experts in Shakespeare should be prepared to teach writing, and experts in writing should be excellent at teaching introductory courses in Shakespeare” (p. 58). Maimon’s concerns about the overproduction of Ph.D. students in English programs are valid, but that is a problem that changing what they learn may not resolve. Given the history of composition and rhetoric and its relationship to the study of literature (see, for example, Berlin, 1987, or Crowley, 1998), focusing this recommendation on writing and literature seems neither a guarantee of equity nor a guarantee of improved undergraduate teaching. Encouraging generalist knowledge in our doctoral programs might not

be limited to knowledge about literature; instead, we might seek out experts in writing who are also well-versed in any of the other disciplines on campus. Further, Maimon does not explain what she means by “full-time,” likely because this is not in the scope of her discussion. Investing in full-time teachers, especially in first-year courses, can improve teaching and learning conditions, but full-time does not necessarily mean tenure-line, and an over-reliance on nontenured but full-time faculty can still perpetuate the cycle of higher education that relies on “the continuous replacement of degree holders with nondegreed labor (or persons with degrees willing to work on unfavorable terms)” (Bousquet, 2008, p. 24). Overproduction is intentional in the current higher education system, and changing that requires not just reconsideration of the doctoral curriculum but the kind of principled transformation that Maimon argues for at a national level.

Maimon’s articulation of a strength-based model of education is perhaps her most important contribution for all readers, especially for those who are not in institutional positions of power and authority. This model focuses on “building on what is right about students rather than fixing what is wrong” (p. 74) and establishes a new view of remediation that can result when troubling institutional hierarchies are broken down. Her argument here builds on philosophies from WAC’s early ties to the basic writing movement and is reminiscent of universal design tenets often discussed by disability studies scholars: higher education must “integrate support into every student’s experience rather than send so-called deficient students to special treatment centers to cure their difficulties” (p. 76). At GSU, this belief leads to small class sizes for first-year students (18 for writing, 30 for others) and learning communities with dedicated support staff, including financial aid advisors and career services professionals as well as various tutors and an advisor. Rather than telling individual students to seek advice from a financial aid advisor or library liaison—who might be an unknown person in an office building across campus—these support staff at GSU are embedded in the first-year student experience. Students who don’t begin their studies at GSU but enter as transfer students through one of their pathway programs are automatically given specific supports that are also made available to GSU’s “homegrown” students (Maimon’s term for those who enter GSU as first-year students), under the recognition that different students have different needs but can benefit from similar opportunities and resources.

Maimon more clearly explains these multiple pathways in Chapters 6 and 7, where she describes the curriculum for homegrown students as well as those who are part of the Dual Degree Program, an established partnership with 17 Chicago-area community colleges. These partnerships were especially crucial when GSU began to matriculate first-year students rather than exclusively offer upper-level courses. With consistently rising college tuition costs, university leaders need to strategically work to support students who enroll in two-year colleges by providing more affordable tuition and smoother transfer processes to complete their degrees. Many of these students are first-generation exclamation point, and Maimon is particularly

interested in advocating for better support for these students. As she puts it, without formal programs and partnerships, “we are challenging novices, most without a higher education support network, to find their way through not one bureaucracy but two. The least we can do as leaders of these daunting bureaucracies is to talk with each other and illuminate the roadway” (p. 92). Cultivating such partnerships requires trust, and this chapter in particular highlights the ways that Maimon’s vision for educational leadership required different strategies in two different contexts, first during her time as Vice President of Arizona State University and now at GSU. This emphasis on adapting to local contexts is a cornerstone of WAC scholarship, and Maimon’s articulation of guiding principles and clear discussion might make it easier for WAC leaders seeking to adapt methods from another institution to their own in moving between “focus” and “peripheral vision” to understand how to do so.

In Chapter 9, Maimon more clearly articulates the “student-first” principle that underlies these changes. Rather than resisting the “prevailing belief in the general public that higher education is a commodity” (p. 113), she explains how putting students first is the best business plan for higher education. Maimon illustrates this principle by explaining how GSU stayed fiscally afloat during the recent budget crisis in Illinois without sacrificing their commitment to students, many of whom relied on state-funded scholarships that were no longer being funded. Maimon openly acknowledges that it was better for the university’s budget to have those students enrolled at GSU because of other federal aid monies that would contribute to the university’s budget. In her view, this wasn’t a one-sided deal, however. Both students and the university benefitted by ensuring that those who would otherwise leave the university without that funding were able to continue their studies.

Maimon’s final chapter argues that making transformative changes in higher education is especially important in today’s society. Those in higher education leadership positions should be leading this change from the inside rather than merely responding to external pressures and forces. It is not enough for higher education to prepare individuals for careers. We as leaders must ensure our institutions “educate students to direct passionate intensity toward creating a better world” (p. 129). At its heart, Maimon’s book argues for the importance of a liberal education in today’s American society, an argument that resonates with conversations about media literacy, journalism, and truth that intensified following the 2016 presidential election. This vision is not unique to Maimon, but what is unique is her institutional positioning that allows her to lead change through a vision deeply connected to the heart of WAC.

Ultimately, Maimon reminds us that our work in WAC is not “just” about writing. WAC began by drawing on work that reframed “remedial writing instruction” by supporting “underprepared” students through more opportunities to write and receive feedback on that writing. It’s no coincidence, then, that Maimon draws on these same values and principles to create a vision for supporting first generation exclamation point students. Her book exemplifies

the strength-based model of teaching and learning, encouraging readers to recognize the existing strengths of higher education and to build on those in our change efforts. In this way, *Leading Academic Change* is part a callback to the principles of higher education that led many, especially the first-generation exclamation point students of the past, to see it as a gateway to a better life, and in part an argument for transforming education to meet the needs of today's first-generation exclamation point students. *Leading Academic Change* is a call to action, then, to follow her lead in developing our own principled visions of education and to follow through with concrete strategies that align our work with that vision. Whether we are presidents, provosts, deans, department chairs, or WPAs, Maimon's work reminds us that we have not only the skill set, but also the obligation, to lead change from inside higher education.

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