

We are the Leaders We've Been Waiting for: Women and Leadership Development in College

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Published by: Stylus Publishing, 2020, 236 pages

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We are the Leaders We've Been Waiting for: Women and Leadership Development in College is the book I have been waiting for since I was an undergraduate woman learning leadership on a college campus. Those who work at the intersections of gender and leadership, especially from a college student development theory perspective, know the desperate need for this text. Now, as a leadership educator, I use this text as a foundational source in a gender and leadership course. Owen takes a deep, comprehensive dive into the experiences of women on college campuses, including as much as possible in nine chapters from the waves of feminism to the debate on whether leadership should be gendered at all and the barriers female leaders face on college campuses today.

Important to this book is knowing its author. Julie E. Owen (she/her) is an associate professor of leadership studies in the School of Integrative Studies at George Mason University. In the first chapter, she dives into her own identities and positionalities and explores her journey to writing this book. She, much like myself, found herself assigned to teach a women/gender and leadership undergraduate course and struggled to find literature written for college women about their experiences with leadership. Owen (2020) states, "throughout this decade of teaching, I was unable to find any single book that introduced concepts of gender and leadership to students in developmental, intersectional, and critically conscious ways" (p. 8). Owen wrote the book as a response to a call to action from her students who asked her to fill a critical gap in the literature. In responding, Owen ensured the book included space for her students' stories, experiences, and voices, which she collected through an autoethnographic process. As such, the chapters balance "weighty peer-reviewed scholarship side by side with personal narratives, reflective exercises, poetry, and occasionally a bit of humor" (Owen, 2020, p. 9).

One of the most compelling and unique aspects of this book is that every chapter ends with a narrative from a college student exploring the messages they grew up hearing about leadership, the barriers they have faced in the leadership process, and more. Having used this book over two semesters of teaching an undergraduate gender and leadership course, students continue to tell me that these narratives are some of the most compelling pieces of the book, as they hear from peers who have had similar experiences around their gender identity and leadership.

In the foreword, Heather D. Shea and Kristen A. Renn articulate four reasons this book is desperately needed: (a) it centers and features student voices; (b) it is intersectional and critically conscious; (c) it “complicates the gendered notions of ‘women’s leadership’”; and (d) it challenges “SHE-roes,” or women in leadership roles are put on pedestals (Owen, 2020, p. xi). It previews Owen’s efforts to “both name women and women’s experiences while being gender expansive to interrupt binary conceptions of who is a woman (and thus by default, who is not)” (Owen, 2020, p. x).

Chapter 1 opens with 11 short scenarios and messages that women engaging in campus leadership may encounter, from being nonverbally told they are the ones who need to take notes in a group project meeting to being told to smile more by a stranger. I have used these scenarios in my teaching as a raise-your-hand or cross-the-line activity and found them to resonate deeply with students of all gender identities. Owen also frames the book in this chapter, grounding it in intersectionality, critical consciousness, and student developmental theory. She also argues that leadership is not positional or hierarchical and that many of the concepts discussed in the book are socially constructed. Though informed by Owen’s own positionality, the book is collaborative and multi-vocal, deliberately presenting contradictory views on gender and leadership.

Chapter 2 more deeply explores the waves of feminism alongside the waves of leadership. It also explores some key terminology about gender and leadership for shared understanding and begins to investigate power and privilege. Chapter 3 dives into identity, intersectionality, and efficacy in college student leadership development. Individual social identities are explored as well as a review of the leadership identity development model (Komives et al., 2005).

Chapter 4 focuses on gender socialization, including the “social, cultural, political, individual, and organizational” (Owen, 2020, p. 10) influences on how young people learn about gender and gender systems, from toys and games they played as children to religion to technology and media. Chapter 5 focuses more on leadership on campuses and in communities and includes discussion on pressing topics on our campuses, including body image and Title IX. The chapter concludes with a

discussion of moving from feminine to feminist leadership on college campuses (Shea & Renn, 2017).

Chapter 6 explores stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination with the representation of gender in leadership. This chapter takes a deep dive into the existing literature on topics, including implicit bias and pay and promotion gaps. In Chapter 7, metaphors for women in leadership are explored in greater depth, including the glass ceiling and leaking pipeline. Career leadership is also explored, as are personal, organizational, and policy strategies for navigating gender and leadership.

Chapter 8 “reviews traditional leader prototypes and explores research about whether there really are gender-based differences in leadership” (Owen, 2020, p. 152). This chapter challenges the notions that men lead in directive styles while women tend to lead in participatory styles, arguing that we need to degender leadership as a phenomenon. Research and studies on gender differences are presented. Finally, Chapter 9 concludes with the critical hope for reimagining women and leadership with strategies and conversations about allyship. Just as this book was the result of a call to action, Owen ends with one as well; “I invite you to move from inquiry, or learning about a topic, to action, or taking steps to create more equitable and just spaces around you. This is the journey toward liberation” (Owen, 2020, p. 186). As a note, after the last chapter is a comprehensive glossary that makes new terminology and concepts more accessible to readers.

In my teaching, I have used the whole book as an assigned text, but I have also used chapters as standalone readings. For example, students in my gender and leadership course read the entire book. In my leadership theory course, they only read Chapter 7. Both options have worked well and have served to advance the conversations in leadership education around gender and leadership development on my campus.

This book begins a critical conversation on identity-based leadership literature and, specifically, gender and leadership learning on our campuses. Owen has continued working in this arena since the book’s release, creating slide decks for each chapter that offer the major takeaways that are accessible for educators. Also, in partnership with Jennifer M. Pigza, Owen has developed a forthcoming facilitation guide to accompany *We are the Leaders We’ve Been Waiting for: Women and Leadership Development in College: A Facilitation Resource* will be an incredible tool for educators, offering 40 step-by-step modules and activities to help facilitate learning about gender and leadership for college students. These activities will range from one short session on gender and leadership to entire courses on the topic.

As a field, student affairs continues to guide our work on serving students. This book is a direct response to expressed student needs and now serves students across the country. It is a critical read for student affairs professionals and leadership educators working with college women today and with college students who want to work to make our campuses more inclusive, equitable, and accessible for all leaders.

References

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