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What Happened to Re-Visioning Community College Leadership? A 25-Year Retrospective

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What happened to re-visioning community college leadership?

A 25-year retrospective

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Abstract

This research sought to determine if the discourse on community college leadership changed since Amey and Twombly published their discourse analysis of community college literature in 1992. More women now lead two-year colleges than ever before and conceptions of leadership have evolved over time, but has the discourse of leadership changed as well? Four main findings emerged. First, masculine normed leadership approaches remain unquestioned in the literature. Second, participatory leadership rhetoric emerged as a trend at the turn of the century. Third, women do the bulk of the writing about women leaders. Finally, ideal work norms still prevail. The roots of authoritative leadership retain a strong hold in community colleges and intentional actions are required to achieve real change in constructions of leadership.

*Keywords*: gendered organizations, women’s leadership, discourse analysis, community colleges, masculine norms
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What happened to re-visioning community college leadership?

A 25-year retrospective

In 1992, Amey and Twombly published their discourse analysis of community college leadership literature up to 1990 that highlighted the gendered nature of the images of leadership over the life cycle of community colleges in the United States. Twenty-five odd years on, we ask, has the discourse changed? DiCroce (1995) argued that women community college presidents would provide “the new verse form” for community college leadership (p. 79). Indeed, women have made progress in community colleges, arguably making two-year colleges more women-friendly than other institutional types (Townsend & Twombly, 2006). For example, women are at the helm of one in every three community colleges and constitute 50% of all chief academic officers (American Council on Education [ACE], 2012; Eckel, Cook, & King, 2009). Missing from survey data, however, is identification of leaders along the gender spectrum. Despite the advances of women in leadership, masculine norms regarding who can lead community colleges and how to lead retain their hold (Eddy, 2009; Eddy & Cox, 2008; Gillett-Karam, 2017; Wilson & Cox, 2012).

The anticipated retirements of current community college leaders (ACE, 2012; Weisman & Vaughn, 2007) provides a natural time to question views of the construction of leadership. Since 2001, calls of a leadership crisis in community colleges have been constant (Shults, 2001), even though it is only recently that two-year colleges have witnessed the cusp of the crisis predicted at the turn of the century. Increasingly, short tenures of sitting presidents have added to the constant need to replace top-level leaders on campus, as evident in California where community college presidents last a scant 3.5 years in their position (Wheelhouse, 2016).
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Nationally, community college presidents serve an average of six years in their position, but 38% of all presidents have been on campus less than five years (Gagliardi, Espinosa, Turk, & Taylor, 2017). The openings in these top-level jobs provide an opportunity for re-visioning what leadership looks like (Eddy, Sydow, Alfred, & Garza Mitchell, 2015; Sydow & Alfred, 2013). Yet, any new conceptions of leadership are limited by the ways aspiring leaders receive messages regarding the norms of leading.

Historically, the construction of leadership is rooted in masculine norms (Embry, Padgett, & Caldwell, 2008; Glazer-Raymo, 1999; Twombly, 1995). An expectation that stems from the masculine norm is that leaders will devote themselves completely to the institution, based on the heteronormative assumption that someone else takes care of the leaders’ personal responsibilities, usually a wife (Acker, 1990). Organizations have long upheld the ideal of workers who are completely devoted to work, and have no personal responsibilities, and indeed lives, apart from work (Acker, 1990; Williams, 2000). Acker (1990) dubbed this fictitious ideal worker the “disembodied worker” (p. 149), and argued that this ideal worker is at the center of gendered organizations. Despite a tendency toward a more interpersonal approach, women leaders modify their behavior toward task orientation to fit their organizational settings (Nidiffer, 2001). In their research on community college leadership, Eddy and Cox (2008) discovered that notwithstanding the general belief that community colleges are democratic institutions, they are, in fact, gendered organizations in which women leaders emulate masculine norms to gain credibility as leaders. Current national discourse on community colleges continues to reflect as well as perpetuate masculine normed leadership (Wilson & Cox, 2012) that favors leaders who embody characteristics typically displayed by men.
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Nidiffer (2001) proposed an integrated model of leadership that draws from feminine and masculine traits of leadership that are both socialized and acquired. It is, however, important to note the essentialist nature of leadership promoted in the last century that served as the backdrop to Nidiffer’s (2001) model. Indeed, she created this model in response to how “gender schema assume men and women are different based on a combination of nature and nurture and as a result, each gender manifests different behaviors in various aspects of life” (Nidiffer, 2001, p. 109). This blended model builds on a gender binary that emphasized historic ideals of differences and competencies, and merges long attributed masculine and feminine skills of men and women to create an emergent form of leadership. Today, gender fluidity recasts the historic notion of a gender binary (Blackmore, 2002; Lorber, 1995). The collaborative orientation of emergent leaders may begin to create new conceptions of leadership that include a more integrated concept of traits typically associated with the gender continuum, rather than the binary of men and women. Yet, as the argument above highlights, when leadership occurs within gendered organizations, anyone not identifying as a cisgender man (those men who are not transgender and identify with their birth sex) is often judged as falling short of expected masculine norms.

This study investigated how community college literature portrays leadership since Amey and Twombly’s 1992 study. In particular, we wanted to understand if leadership was still depicted based on historic masculine norms or if definitions and views of leadership in community colleges have expanded over time. Thus, this study set out to answer two main questions: How does higher education literature portray community college leaders with respect to gender? To what extent is the literature on community college leadership contributing to the legitimation of gendered leadership in community colleges?
Literature Review

The literature reviewed to support this study focused on the evolution of leadership constructs over time. We situated the literature within community college contexts and focused in particular on the masculine norms that contribute to gendered organizations. Finally, in this section we present the conceptual framework that guided our study.

Evolution of leadership theories. The ideal of the “Great Man,” one who can rely on inherent talents and skills to direct others, finds root in classical leadership theory (Heifetz, 1994). Over time, thoughts on leadership changed to focus more on human relationships, contingency theories, cognitive theories, and collaborative or distributed leadership (Kezar, Carducci, & Contreras-McGavin, 2006). Yet, despite the popular leadership theories of the day that more often associate with women’s leadership, women in academic institutions still do not occupy leadership positions at the same level as men (ACE, 2012).

For our study, it was important to understand the evolution of leadership theory over time in order to situate our reading of the articles included in this research and to understand better how leadership was manifested in higher education literature on community college leadership. The basis for early research on leadership emerged from industrial business operations versus academic leadership (Rost, 1993). Even today, we still take the lead of business and organizational researchers to view leadership and administration in higher education (Spendlove, 2007). The realization that a check-list of traits (Stogdill & Bass, 1981) was not sufficient to either develop or judge leaders ushered in new thinking about leadership with an increased focus on the relationships between superior and subordinate (Bennis, 1989; Goleman, 2000; Heifetz, 1994; Lipman-Blumen, 1992). Recognition of the importance of culture and symbolism (Bess & Dee, 2007; Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006; Tierney, 2000) shifted attention yet again with respect to
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leadership to focus on how leaders use both culture and symbols to advance their agendas and also in how they are influenced by institutional culture. More recently, leadership theory has focused on cognitive approaches to leading, including the concept of thinking of the leader as learner regardless of gender (Amey, 2005, 2013). Additionally, new and expanding conceptions of leadership move beyond seeing leadership as solely vested in a single person, and instead look to leadership relying more on networks and connectivity (Amey, 2005). These connections gave rise to conceptualizing leadership as a web (Amey, 2005; Helgesen, 1995), with more reliance on the strength of connecting relationships versus a singular, authoritative leader.

Community college contexts. Community colleges are similar to other institutions of higher education in their predilection for borrowing from other sectors, for example business and government (Levin, 2005). As well, community colleges also look at how leadership at four-year colleges and universities occurs as the bulk of writing on leadership in colleges relies on data from the university sector (Geiger, 2004; Lewis & Hearn, 2003). But, as Levin (2013) argued, “scholars of community colleges have neglected to analyze and make sense of the discourse of community colleges” (p. 247), in particular regarding the changing nature of the institutions and what it means to lead them. The community college context influences how leadership is enacted, and how it is constructed due to its different mission foci, its different student demographics, and its role as a bridging institution with ties to business training, high school dual enrollment, and university transfer. Furthermore, the general organizational realities at community colleges diverge considerably from those at colleges and universities since the majority of faculty are part-time and have a focus on teaching rather than research (Twombly & Townsend, 2008). A result of lack of professional identity for faculty is reliance on hierarchical leadership as the norm in community colleges (Levin, 2013). Thus, the literature on and about
community college leaders serves to influence what is viewed as the norm, and indeed the model, in the two-year sector.

New theories of leadership in community colleges acknowledge the complexity of these modern day colleges and the constant need to deal with chaos and change (Eddy et al., 2015). What remains unknown is whether these conceptions of leadership are inclusive of women or broader conceptions of gender, and how discourse portrays the norms of community college leadership. Amey (2013) offered a reconsideration of leadership of community colleges, including recommendations on an individual level and an institutional level. Pointedly, Amey (2013) concluded, “If gender runs through the interpretations of organizational perceptions and sense making, constructions of symbols, interactions, and relationships (and by extension, networks and collaboration) as Acker (1990) claims, then intercultural competence, where gender is concerned, is important to consider in leadership” (p. 143). We posit that organizational perspectives of leadership theories must attend to how leading change, organizational development, adaptive work, and collaboration build inclusivity. Specifically, broader conceptions of gender must be considered regarding community college leadership.

**Gendered leadership.** Acker (1990) argued that organizations, in fact, are not gender neutral, but rather built around the “disembodied worker” who has no interests and commitments outside of work (p. 149). The ideal employee was cast as being a man with a wife at home who takes care of his and his children’s needs (Williams, 2000). Thus, cisgender women are caught in a double bind (Eagly & Carli, 2007): if they operate and work as men and enact the ideal worker norms (Williams, 2000), they are judged as not meeting feminine ideals of being nurturing and family focused (Lorber, 1995; West & Zimmerman, 1987), but if they act authentically in leading and ignore the masculine norms of directive leading, they are
marginalized in the workplace (Appelbaum, Audet, & Miller, 2003). Men, on the other hand, are often praised when they employ more cooperative behaviors often associated with women’s leadership (Boatwright & Forrest, 2000; Eddy, 2009). Our research sought to understand how gendered leadership is portrayed in higher education journals to determine how leadership is constructed.

In their review of the leadership literature on community colleges, Townsend and Twombly (1998) found that organizational change was needed in order to make community colleges more democratic, diverse, and inclusive of all races and genders. Indeed, they were not the only ones to find community colleges wanting in terms of gender inclusiveness. Tedrow and Rhoads (1999) discovered that women have to employ reactive strategies to be able to establish themselves as leaders in masculine normed community college organizational structures, a thought echoed by Eddy and Cox (2008). However, despite calls by scholars for structural change, women are still judged against the masculine norm, and find it difficult to lead more authentically (Eddy, 2009). Moreover, men too are hurt by singular conceptions of alpha male role models.

Even though human society has changed considerably since the “Great Man” days, organizations continue to cling to outmoded ideals of workers and leaders. Despite the democratic and inclusive orientation of community colleges, organizationally they remain gendered and continue to perpetuate masculine normed leadership (Eddy & Cox, 2008). Critically, these norms disadvantage women (Eagly & Carli, 2007) and individuals who are not cigenndered White men (Davis & Klobassa, 2017) as these leaders are always judged as other or less than ideal (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Williams, 2000). This judgement contributes to the persistence of a glass ceiling (Bain & Cummings, 2000) and second generation bias (Sturm,
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2001). In view of calls by scholars to change gendered organizational structures of community colleges, this study sought to examine the discourse in higher education literature on community college leadership from a feminist perspective to discover the extent to which the discourse reflects and legitimates gendered leadership.

**Conceptual framework.** Given our focus on how the literature on community college leadership constructs gender, we used Acker’s (1990) work on gendered organizations for our conceptual model. This work identified five interacting ways in which gendering occurs. First, divisions in work occur along gender lines; second, symbols and imagery reinforce or problematize these divisions; third, processes and interactions within the organization reinforce gender divides and dominance; fourth, these processes influence individual choices regarding gender identity; and fifth, gender contributes to the processes in building social structures. Further, we focused on the ways in which the ideal work norm (Williams, 2000) contributed to supporting the gendered organization.

In the time since Acker’s (1990) original publication, gender inequities have persisted. Acker (2012) proposed that the persistence of these gender imbalances can be attributed to gender substructures. “These gendering processes are, at a less visible level, supported by gender subtexts of organizing and a gendered logic of organization that link the persistence of gender divisions to the fundamental organization of capitalist societies” (Acker, 2012, p. 219). Despite the appearance of neutrality, gender subtexts reinforce a narrative embedded in practices and policies. Likewise, gendered logic refers to the common understandings of culture (Schein, 2010). Also contributing to the subtext are norms of the ideal worker (Williams, 2000). In the next section we detail our methodology for this study and describe how we used our conceptual framework for analysis.
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Methodology

Amey and Twombly (1992) used Cherryholmes’s (1988) conceptualization of discourse analysis, which includes both written and spoken language as legitimate discourse. We used the discourse analysis framework by Allan (2003, 2008, 2010), which is rooted in poststructural theories of Foucault, Derrida, Kristeva, and Irigaray, to provide the basis for analyzing the texts. We opted to use Allan’s (2010) approach to discourse analysis because it not only extended Cherryholmes’s (1988) poststructural thinking, but also integrated feminist theory (Glazer-Raymo, 1999, 2008). Allan (2010) underscored the role of sociocultural practices in understanding discourse analysis, which recognizes the role of dominant discourse and the assumptions regarding asymmetrical power among individuals. Here, the use of feminist theory provided a focus on how the discourse treated historic gender roles and if the discourse reified the roles (Hart & Metcalfe, 2010). We focused on written texts only, specifically scholarly journals, because they present current research and serve as authoritative resources that help guide actions on campus, as well as future research. The central questions guiding the analysis were: How does higher education literature portray community college leaders with respect to gender? To what extent is the literature on community college leadership contributing to the legitimation of gendered leadership in community colleges?

Data collection. Given the amount of written text now available online, we sought to narrow the data for this study. We focused on a review of research articles between 1990 and 2015 published in The Community College Review (CCR) and The Community College Journal of Research and Practice (CCJRP), the two most prominent journals covering the community college sector; we also reviewed articles in The Journal of Higher Education (JHE) and The Review of Higher Education (RHE), two of the mainstream higher education journals. We made
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the decision of what journals to include based on several factors: 1. As the most prominent community college journals, *CCR* and *CCJRP* are used as reading sources of doctoral programs focusing on community college leadership; 2. The influence of *RHE* and *JHE* on higher education as a field of study creates a ripple effect in what receives theoretical attention; 3. The vetting process involved in journal publication recognizes the level of expertise of the article authors and assures more rigor and quality relative to non-peer reviewed venues such as dissertations or online blogs and newsletters (Becher, 1987; Bray & Major, 2011; Hyland & Bondi, 2006). Journals are also a good source of discourse because they reflect current thought and allow examination of the evolution of the discourse over time (Hart, 2006; Hart & Metcalfe, 2010; Townsend, 1993; Townsend, Donaldson, & Wilson, 2005).

We looked at the table of contents and abstracts of the four targeted journals (online and in print where online journal editions were unavailable) over the timeline to assure that titling did not exclude relevant articles. Further, we used Google as a search engine to assure we did not miss relevant articles on the topic of community college leadership. We refined the sample by excluding articles that mentioned leadership in the title but dealt with student leadership. We also excluded book reviews of text on community college leadership. We included articles representing a full range of leadership topics and positions in community colleges using the logic that even though certain positions require particular skill sets, what individuals learned as mid-level leaders stayed primarily intact when promoted to upper level positions (Mumford, Campion, & Morgeson, 2007). The mental models of leadership gathered along the career pathway create habits of mind that individuals bring with them when assuming upper level positions (Kezar et al., 2006).
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The sample for this study consisted of 32 articles from the Community College Review, 102 articles from the Community College Journal of Research and Practice, six articles from the Review of Higher Education, and eight from the Journal of Higher Education for a total review of 148 articles between 1990 and 2015. We reviewed the full manuscripts. Topically, the research reported in the publications included a range of foci, e.g., top level leaders, mid-level leaders, aspiring leaders, stakeholder views of leaders. These articles included an array of research methodologies, with an increased focus on qualitative methods over time to capture historically marginalized voices.

**Discourse analysis.** We used Allan’s (2003, 2008, 2010) approach to discourse analysis, which is grounded in feminist poststructuralism. According to Allan (2010), poststructuralism posits that “language is socially constituted and shaped by an interplay between texts, readers, and larger cultural context rather than carrying any kind of fixed or inherent meaning that can be ‘discovered’” (p. 13). As a result, discourse is “socially situated” and “never neutral” (Allan, 2008, p. 6). Thus, from a poststructural standpoint, discourse does not simply reflect culture but also produces it. How leadership is presented in journal articles, therefore, matters in how readers come to understand what it means to be a community college leader, and reflects the norms of the time when the articles were written. This conceptualization of discourse analysis was appropriate for our research because we were examining the texts for gendered language to find out how they produce and legitimate the reality of community college leadership.

**Coding analysis.** The first coding of the database occurred looking at the journal article titles. Here, we coded the titles using an *a priori* coding scheme that judged if the title reflected gendered assumptions of leadership (Acker, 1990, 2012). We looked for symbolism or imagery that reinforced the subtext of gendered divisions of leadership and noted the ways in which
leader participants in the research discussed their identity. Finally, we coded titles by ideal worker standards, categorizing titles here that made assumptions of masculine normed leadership. The ways in which the context of the community college culture reified gender was an important consideration (Acker, 2012). Each of the authors coded the titles separately, and then compared their analysis. In instances of disagreement, we discussed the rationale each brought to the coding decision and jointly agreed upon the final coding. Also interesting to note and to help situate the writing on leadership in community college are the numbers of articles written in the four journals. In the community college journals, there was a marked increase in coverage of leadership topics throughout the decades. Whereas in the two mainstream higher education journals, a total of only 14 articles were found for the entire 25 year period of review (six in *RHE* and eight in *JHE*). This analysis helped highlight changes in leadership discourse over the period of review.

Another level of analysis occurred after reviewing the journal titles as we noticed that the majority of the authors appeared to be women. We gauged their gender by first names as they apply in line with general social conventions. We created a spreadsheet with the author names and article titles, and simply counted how many articles were authored solely by women, co-authored by multiple women, co-authored by at least one woman and one or several men, authored solely by men, and co-authored by multiple men. Consequently, we also paid attention to the feminist orientation of the articles specifically as it relates to critiquing the current scholarship and gendered structures of community colleges, and the connection, if any, to the apparent gender of the author.

The second level of coding occurred when we reviewed each of the articles in their entirety. We coded the articles in NVivo, using the terms “masculine leadership” and “feminine
leadership” to build word trees for the phrases. The cluster of terms helped contribute to the creation of our codes. As other researchers have done in coding for gender themes in discourse analysis of text (Allan, Gordon, & Iverson, 2006; Wilson & Cox, 2012), we first created *a priori* codes for coding the articles. Broadly, these codes included the categories of Feminine Leadership, Masculine Leadership, Integrated Leadership, and Disembodied Worker. In each of these categories, we created a listing of often linked terms for each of these categories based on the literature (Nidiffer, 2001; Wilson & Cox, 2012). For example, items for Feminine included advocate, servant, embrace, listen, nurture, etc., whereas those for Masculine included implement, employ, authoritative, develop, manage, etc. In the category for Integrated, we included process, contribute, model, and enhance, to name a few. For Disembodied Worker we included terms that favored work over personal time, and terms that did not assume family responsibilities.

**Trustworthiness.** Like other forms of qualitative research, discourse analysis requires attention to rigor and quality in its methods. “Discourse analysts face the challenges of performing systematic and rigorous analyses to capture a discourse’s functions, of reporting discourse analyses transparently, of providing appropriate evidence to warrant claims, and of representing their analyses and results” (Greckhamer, William, Catherine, & Cilesiz, 2014, p. 428). To this end, we first reviewed five articles independently and then debriefed on our coding and compared coding processes. The independent review allowed us to examine the data individually to see to what extent we both coded similarly. In the rare cases where we disagreed on the coding, we discussed our reasoning by referring to the literature to ensure that we understood how each reached our conclusions. In this way, we worked toward shared consensus on coding.
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Our initial review indicated that most articles on community college leadership contained some review of the existing literature. Mostly, these reviews were remarkably similar. For example, many articles included references to the research of George Vaughan (1986, 1989), an early and prolific writer about community college leadership. We found, however, that when the author used a feminist or critical lens for analysis, the literature reviews were not merely reporting out what others had found. Instead, these articles critiqued the literature for what was assumed about the norms of leadership. Thus, the initial review highlighted this important feature of community college leadership literature, and resulted in us creating a code for instances in which authors critiqued the existing literature base. After this initial comparative review, we split the database of articles between us and each coded half of the remaining articles.

Our positionality as community college leadership scholars, and higher education practitioners who identify as cisgender women and feminists provided us with an insider’s view of the culture of these institutions and heightened awareness of the norms. We used reflexivity to assure that our claims were linked to the evidence presented in the text (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). Further, we presented our initial findings at several professional association meetings and benefited from comments from discussants and conference participants.

Limitations. One important limitation of this research is its grounding in theoretical frameworks that are built on long standing gender binaries that shape human language and discourse. It is admittedly difficult to overcome gendered connotations when undertaking a critique of a discourse using the language of that discourse. We have made an effort to critically examine these gendered constructs by identifying them in the existing literature to highlight how they are represented to, unwittingly or otherwise, perpetuate the binaries.
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Secondly, we must caution that we have gauged the gender of the authors by first names as they traditionally apply to men and women. We cannot be certain how many of the authors (particularly those whom we have never met) identify themselves on the gender spectrum. This lack of knowledge of gender identification by the authors is a limitation of our study imposed by the social construction of gender that includes the names people are given (or are self-chosen) in accordance with the gender that is constructed for them by society, and which may not necessarily reflect their gender identity.

Finally, it might be argued that the expanded discourse on community college leadership since the writing of Amey and Twombly’s (1992) initial work in the field makes it difficult to summarize the dominant discourse. Even though other sources exist that cover community college leadership, the journals included in this research have high indexing for citations (h5 index; \textit{CCR}=20; \textit{CCJR}=16; \textit{RHE}=25; \textit{JHE}=28). As well, it has been long documented that doctoral degrees serve as a pre-requisite requirement to become a community college president (Katsinas & Kempner, 2005; Townsend, 1996), and it is common practice in the curriculum to draw on scholarly work in reputable journals. The proliferation of articles that focus on community college leadership, in particular, that are found in the \textit{Community College Review} and the \textit{Community College Journal of Research and Practice}, offer the widest choice of publications on the topic. Consequently, the focus on these four publications resulted in a rich database that allowed us to uncover the discourse on community college leadership, the main features of which are discussed in the next section.

\textbf{Findings}

Four main findings emerged in this research. First, the writing on leadership over the past 25 years largely leaves unquestioned traditional views of masculine normed leadership.
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Second, an emerging trend in articles since the turn of the 21st century included more participatory leadership rhetoric. Third, the bulk of writing on or about women leaders is done by women, which runs the risk of reducing gender issues in community college leadership to a “woman’s” issue versus a larger concern for the field. This categorization reinforces the notion that work done by women is less important. Fourth, ideal work norms still prevail.

Problematizing the literature. When writing on community college leaders, many historic works were referenced as background literature. Typical among these when reading article literature reviews was reference to community college-focused studies by Weisman and Vaughan (2007), Vaughan (1986, 1989), Amey (2005), and Twombly (1995), to name a few. General leadership trends often referenced summary reviews of how leadership has changed over time (e.g., Bensimon, Neumann, & Birnbaum, 1989; Kezar et al., 2006). Only when reading articles that problematized the historic reviews of leadership did it become obvious how ubiquitous an accepted masculine norm for community college leadership was in the literature. True, in the early 1990s, women only represented about 8% of all community college presidents (ACE, 2012) making it less likely that the community college presidents studied were not men. Yet, this pattern of uncritical reference to the male dominated literature remains prevalent to the current day.

Consider the following example from 2010 that reifies traditional masculine traits of leadership:

Critical elements of successful leadership and leadership support that emerged included leadership power; promotion and possession of confidence; willingness to face challenge; preparation; and key characteristics including strengths, weaknesses, and skill sets.

(Taylor & Killacky, 2010, p. 998)
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Compare this to:

Traditional organizational theories centering on ideas such as politics, resource allocation, efficiency, systems (natural, open, or learning), and rationality are not adequately equipped for uncovering organizational problems linked to gender and gender differences (Bensimon, 1989, 1995; Ferguson, 1984; Smircich, 1985). A thorough analysis of women’s issues likely requires a cultural focus primarily aimed at understanding the experiences of women as “women.” (Tedrow & Rhoads, 1999, p. 3)

As these examples illustrate, how we consider existing research on leadership begins to create a particular foundation upon which to build new findings and to interpret data. When gender is moved from the margins and into the center, different perspectives emerge. A different vantage point creates new understandings of the same data. Yet, it is not enough to substitute a woman’s orientation to leading for that of a man’s. Nor is simply intersecting the “masculine” and “feminine” ways of leading enough. Instead, new constructions of leadership are required. For example, when critiquing the historic leadership literature, Wilson and Cox (2012) stated,

The hero motif is well-nourished in Western culture through music, movies, and novels. Westerners understand the notion of a hero, and want to both have and be a hero. This extends to our organizational life. However, the masculine hero motif is self-focused, and, from our perspective, therefore, a failed hero. (p. 279)

These authors argued that the historic notions of leaders make it “difficult for women to assume a role of hero-leader” (p. 281). By problematizing the expectations of leaders to adopt masculine-hero norms, Wilson and Cox (2012) provided an alternative narrative, and a different starting point for discussing leadership.
Likewise, when reviewing the discourse of leadership as evidenced in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Allan and colleagues (2006) noted, “Too often, traditional models of leadership portray leaders as individuals who use power to control others rather than organize, who repress followers rather than empower, and who set limits on change rather than support evolution” (p. 44). This finding of a focus on autonomy runs counter to the notion of leadership as a collective construct. Highlighting how competing discourses emerge in their analysis begins to problematize conceptions of leadership, yet the authors concluded that the dominant discourse reinforced ideals of autonomy and hero-like traits despite espoused needs for higher education leaders to become more collaborative.

Not only does the construction of leadership guide how individuals come to understand what it means to be a leader, so too does the community college setting. Jones and Warnick (2012) noted it is “well to recognize and understand that future community college presidents may be motivated by the context in which they work” (p. 231). The community college location can provide an alignment for leaders with democratic ideals (Townsend & Twombly, 1998, 2006). Similarly, Frankland’s (2010) review of community college leadership summarized that “self-reflective, critical leadership serves as a foundation for effective leadership practices in a community college setting” (p. 3). These broader interpretations of the literature focused on the interdependences required in the community college sector and highlight the need for leaders to focus on relationships.

Like Twombly (1995), Sullivan (2001) sorted community college leaders into four generations. Sullivan argued that the old patriarchal model of leadership in use at the inception of community colleges no longer holds use. Further, she noted that women and leaders of color coming of age in the 1960s social movement era of women’s rights and civil rights felt a sense of
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exclusion from the masculine power structure, and argued that the “leaders entered adulthood with the belief that the structure and authority were oppressive and should be circumvented or recreated” (Sullivan, 2001, p. 563). Onwards of 15 years since the writing of this article and we still see calls for a re-creation and re-visioning of leadership present.

In problematizing the masculine-based leadership literature upon which the bulk of the articles we reviewed was based, several suggestions for how to shift thinking about leadership development occurred. Amey (2005) posited,

By conceptualizing leadership as learning, one relinquishes the need for a specific career orientation, and can look at the ways in which leadership is developed and shared throughout the organization; leadership is no longer a phenomenon that emerges with a specific organizational role. (p. 690)

When viewed as learning, leadership construction is more fluid and without a single, strict model of “right.” Leadership as learning also avoids the association of leadership with traits based on gender, thus it is viewed as a skill that can be learned and improved versus innate traits associated with historic conceptions of masculine normed leadership. Wharton (1997) argued that leaders need to question their own assumptions about leadership, and in turn their assumptions about their own behavior. This level of self-reflection provides a forum for constant change and learning from experiences. Despite the dearth of problematizing masculine leadership constructions in the literature reviews, one sign of change manifested in the increasingly participatory orientation to leadership in the literature since 1990.

**Participatory leadership rhetoric.** The writing on community college leadership changed in the early 2000s when more participatory images of leadership were noted in the articles reviewed. Of the 67 articles published in between 2000 and 2009, a third included a
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focus on women and another third on integrated and participatory approach to leading. To illustrate, Donahue (2003) interviewed community college board chairs and discovered that facilitation emerged as a major theme in the recommended role for chair. Donahue linked this theme with servant leadership and observed:

Service to others is the basis of facilitation. Through facilitation the chair is able to serve others and balance the interplay of the other themes by communicating information, encouraging participation, and revealing expectations to realize collaboration on issues before the board. (p. 41)

Nevarez and Wood (2012) reiterated this orientation when offering, “Leaders must take the time to consider multiple perspectives, seek advice from others, contemplate alternative courses of action, and simply allow for time to process what is occurring” (p. 312). Here, corresponding to a collaborative approach to leading was a reliance on reflection by leaders.

A former president reflected back on her career, “The successful president discovers very quickly that power is shared with many. Increasingly, there is no final word” (Guthrie, 2001, p. 246). Historically, women have been associated with more collaborative approaches to leadership, thus the president’s reflection above reifies gendered expectations for women leaders. Several articles identified the need for collaboration and shared communication for effective leadership. Since the turn of the century, collaborative approaches to leadership have gained advocacy in the literature, which can encourage leaders of all genders to feel less pressure to be more masculine in their leadership style in order to succeed.

The shift from masculine normed to more participatory leadership is evident as some researchers questioned the leadership competency standards provided by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC). For example, Eddy (2012) reviewed how the
competencies were viewed in rural community colleges. She concluded, “the focus on relationship building also served to make them more competent in collaborations and more conscious of the need to effectively communicate” (p. 38). Likewise, Taylor and Killacky (2010) recommended in their study, “In addition to the primary themes of communication, collaboration, leadership, and relationships, the primary theme of support emerged as a significant element in the leader’s professional and personal life” (p. 1002). In this case, support focused on the individual leader, but this support was rooted in the dependence and accessibility of backing from campus members. The focus of recent researchers on traditionally feminine leadership competencies like “support” is reflective of more women in leadership positions, and the general trend toward more participatory leadership styles as more suited to the current community college milieu.

Deggs and Miller (2013) expanded the idea of collaboration and participation to also include connections with the surrounding community. The tight links with the community to fulfill the two-year college mission builds on and expands participation. Yet, the ability to shift to a more participatory style of leadership is based not only on individual desire, but also on organizational structure. As Eddy and VanDerLinden (2006) reported:

If community colleges want to embrace the ideal of participatory leadership and leadership throughout the organization, organizational structures and the mindsets of leaders may need to change. Currently there is still a reliance on the bureaucratic and reporting hierarchy in how administrators see themselves as leaders. (p. 23)

Sullivan (2001), however, cautioned about the use of participatory leadership given that this approach may be questioned in an era of accountability as heightened levels of reporting link to power in a hierarchy. Further, Sullivan noted, collaborative leadership “is the preferred mode of
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operation, particularly for women and people of color, whose leadership style emphasizes participation, win–win negotiation, consensus building, caring, and nurturing” (p. 563). Yet, since 2001 we may be moving past the notion that participatory approaches to leadership are solely the purview of women or leaders of color. As community colleges become more complex organizations to manage and lead, the ability of a single leader to oversee all areas is problematic. Instead, collaboration, shared leadership, and expectations of participation by a wider range of campus members become critical.

Women writing on women. Another trend emerged in the review of the articles regarding authorship. More women entering the professoriate since 1990 contributed in part to the volume of diverse voices and scholarly writing on leadership. In analyzing this sub-set of writings by gender of the writer, a pattern emerged that when an article was written on or about women leaders, it was authored or co-authored by at least one woman. Additionally, whenever we coded problematizing of literature, we noticed that at least one woman had authored the article. These findings point to the danger of treating gender issues in community colleges as “women’s issues.” First, this narrow understanding of conceptualizing gender in community college leadership limits role models that include a broader range of gender. Second, many of the gender barriers mentioned in the articles focus on issues affecting all leaders, such as excessive work demands. Finally, when only women are writing about the issues facing them the appearance of complaining emerges, which can discount the concerns raised.

Many of the articles authored by women used feminist methodologies. Wilson and Cox (2013) aptly summarize the role of feminist perspectives in research stating, “One aim of feminist criticism is to challenge masculine discourses and create new patterns of thinking that
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exist alongside older patterns” (p. 282). In their review of Chronicle of Higher Education articles on community college leadership, they noted,

Repeatedly, scholars have found examples of leaders acting in both traditionally male and female ways depending on the leadership context, not the leaders’ biological gender (e.g., Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Eddy & VanDerLinden, 2006; Pounder & Coleman, 2002). This shift from seeing leadership choices as being gender-driven to seeing choices as context or situation driven is an important aspect of our understanding of the hero-leader because it calls attention to other-focused leadership rather than self-focused or trait-based. (p. 281)

Conceptions of more complex perspectives of leadership emerged due to the employment of a critical lens for analysis, with the resulting conclusion providing a richer understanding of how leadership is constructed beyond mere binaries of “good” or “bad.”

Another trend we noted was that women are now writing more on leadership in the four journals reviewed. Here, we sorted the authors based on gendered conventions of first names. To illustrate, since 2010, we found that of the 49 articles published in the journals we reviewed, 25 were authored by just women, 11 included at least one woman (seven with women as first author), and another 13 were authored by one or several men. This observation highlights the greater role of women scholars in the current discourse on leadership as authors on two-thirds of the articles, and has implications for the shape this discourse will take in the future given how many of the articles to date were written by women. Pointedly, given the lower numbers of writings on leadership within the RHE and the JHE, it was notable that one individual (a woman) authored 29% of the 14 articles found. This limitation of one individual holding so much sway
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in the mainstream journals and the topics covered in the journals has been covered elsewhere, but is noteworthy in the limitation of voice and perspective found in these journals (Hart, 2006).

**Ideal worker.** The traditional view of masculine normed leadership was evident in our review of articles published during the past 25 years. The assumptions inherent in these publications were that the gendered structures in place that perpetuate the ideal worker norm are entrenched and normalized, thus the burden is on women to conform to the system. Consider these two examples published in the same year in the *Community College Review*. McFarlin, Crittendern, and Ebbers (1999) presented this portrait of the typical outstanding community college president in the year 1999:

[T]he composite outstanding-leading community college president is a married White male. He is about 55 years old, has served as a community college president for 14 years, has been at his current institution for slightly more than 10 years, and achieved his first community college presidency at 41 years of age. There is about a 50/50 chance that he is in his first presidency. (p. 28)

The portrait quoted above is highly suggestive of the ideal worker as a White male with a support system at home (usually a stay-at-home spouse). The “typical” community college president was also able to achieve his first presidency at a relatively young age of 41. This portrait is at odds with the typical profile of a woman leader who has a nontraditional career path, as it is usually interrupted by family responsibilities (Eddy, 2010; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2017). Furthermore, when McFarlin and associates (1999) recommended increasing women and minority participation in leadership they did not question the gendered structures that enable more White men (bearing an uncanny resemblance to the ideal worker) to be outstanding presidents but rather suggested that women and minorities be facilitated to emulate the lead of
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the White male leaders. In contrast, consider this excerpt by Tedrow and Rhoads (1999) from the same year that highlights the constraints women face and overcome to succeed as leaders in gendered organizations:

Through strategies grounded in adaptation, reconciliation, or resistance, the senior-level women administrators in this study found ways to develop a leadership identity within their traditional work context… These findings also generally confirmed the study’s two basic assumptions: (a) women tend to use relational ways of knowing more often than men, and (b) traditional organizations such as community colleges driven by instrumental philosophies generally ignore gender as a cultural force in shaping organizational life. This study based on these assumptions has uncovered a fundamental problem for organizations. Because adaptation, reconciliation, and even resistance are—at the most basic level—reactive strategies; the women are “reacting” to a male dominated organizational context. (pp. 14-15)

Even though the authors did not explicitly focus on the ideal worker norm in community colleges, they critiqued the entrenched gendered structures and subtexts that force women to find survival strategies. Apart from exceptions, such as the Tedrow and Rhoads (1999) study, scant articles were found in our review that questioned the norms undergirding what it means to be an ideal worker in a community college context. Studies using a feminist lens often called into question many of these assumptions and called for a change in structures, but these were few in number and were most often associated with feminist theoretical frameworks. As we enter the first decades of the 21st century, however, a shift is found in questioning the acceptance of the structures with many more researchers questioning masculine normed leadership.
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The disembodied worker norm (Acker, 1990) is evident in the literature with leaders struggling to balance their personal and professional lives. However, there is also evidence that male leaders are increasingly calling into question the desirability of living by the ideal worker norm as well. In qualitative studies, leaders express their desire to not have to lead separate work and home lives. For example, one male president spoke of his desire for work and home life to be “woven together into a fabric” (Stoeckel & Davies, 2007, p. 898).

A lack of balance was a recurring theme in the 2000s. One female president articulated her dependence on her spouse to be able to continue to do her job:

I couldn’t do what I do if I didn’t have him. He really is my support system. He’s the ideal spouse for a community college president . . . He’s semi-retired, and he does all the cooking . . . I needed plane reservations, he made plane reservations for me. Any way that he can support me, he does. (Walker & McPhail 2009, p. 338)

This quote is fairly typical of the support system articulated by community college presidents that enables them to do their job. Yet, those without partners do not have this level of support, and research shows more male leaders than female leaders are married (ACE, 2012; Hartley & Godin, 2009), which leaves those who are single going it alone. Dependence on a retired or stay-at-home spouse, and the associated loss of work-life balance (DeZure, Shaw, & Rojewski, 2014), points to the nature of the job that requires leaders to be constantly in their leadership role and put their work ahead of other responsibilities. Here, the burden falls more on women relative to men.

Regarding community college presidents, Kubala (1999) simply offered, “Like the colleges they lead, they are asked to be all things to all people” (p. 183). Indeed, Guthrie (2001), a retired president, reflected on the cost of 80-hour work weeks when reflecting “The four years
as president brought rewards; however, the costs were substantial for my family and for my physical and psychological reserves” (p. 249). The toll can be exacting. Consider an extreme example of a woman leader in Texas who was a vegetarian. “After enduring scrutiny for making dietary decisions contrary to community standards, she eventually acquiesced and began eating beef—albeit well-done” (Leist, 2007, p. 317). This extreme move to conform is visible and therefore easier to point to as an adaptation to norms, however, there are many other concessions made that are less obvious. The stress of the position often results in divorce as well for women presidents given the demands of holding up both the demands of being an ideal worker and also the demands of home life (Smith, 2001).

Home often provides a source of refuge from the job, as noted by Stoeckel and Davies (2007), “The most common reflective places were the presidents’ homes, which they described as contemplative and habituated, a quiet environment removed from the campus” (p. 898). Yet, this description of home assumes the leaders do not have other care responsibilities for children or elders and are not responsible for the upkeep of the home—meals, cleaning, paying the bills, tracking health care appointments, etc., which creates a subtext based on masculine norms.

Ideal workers are expected to give their all to work, and ultimately to engage in overwork. This situation of overwork was acknowledged by trustees as well. One trustee stated “the expectations for a president are just short of walking on water,” and another trustee added we “typically look for super people” (Plinske & Packard, 2010, p. 307). The specter of overwork is a common one in higher education, and one of the reasons many in chief academic officer positions cite for not seeking advancement to a presidency (Eckel et al., 2009). Critically, overwork is gendered as it effects women differently than men in dual career couples, with an
outcome that either the woman quits her job or continues doing both more work in her paid position and at home, whereas men do not leave their positions (Cha, 2010).

The danger of reducing leadership to a singular ideal was articulated by two women presidents in Frankland’s (2010) study. These women offered how “their gender was a boundary they had to cross to become presidents” (p. 250); further, one stated, “My career has not been all rosy. And there were many times when I thought . . . I’m tainted merchandise, I will never have the opportunity to do what I’m capable of doing simply because I will be judged as that trouble maker or that mouthy female or whatever” (p. 250). When gender is narrowly defined to a masculine norm for the ideal, leaders across the gender spectrum lose. Cisgender men too suffer due to expectations that they will behave in traditionally masculine ways even when such behavior may not be authentic to them but is instead an imposition of hegemonic masculinity (Davis & Klobassa, 2017).

**Summary and Implications**

In our study, we set out to discover if scholarly discourse about community college leadership has changed since Amey and Twombly (1992) conducted their research more than 25 years ago. We are pleased to report that the blatant images of the “philosopher-king” and the “military hero” (Amey & Twombly, 1992, p. 147) are hard to find in the community college literature since 1990. We have observed more participatory images, increased acceptance of different leadership styles, and questioning of expectations of masculine norms as the ideal. Thinking more broadly about leadership has created a space in which men in leadership positions also wish for more balance in their work and family lives (Fairchild, 2014), which is a welcome sign that men too no longer wish to be disembodied workers.
Alternative voices: 2.0? The earlier work by Amey and Twombly (1992) concluded that alternative voices were developing in the literature, often due to the feminist movement. Indeed, our research found that when feminist methods were used for a research study, broader conceptions of leadership, and who can lead, emerged. Yet, even though some of the imagery has shifted over the past 25 years, the ideal of leaders who walk on water and give everything to the job remains. This subtext is embedded in leader expectations based on ideal worker norms (Acker, 2012). Thus, on the one hand we find that women are more present in the community college literature than before, but on the other hand, the disembodied worker norm (Acker, 1990) lingers. Our findings indicate that the masculine norm of leadership is still rooted firmly in the organizational structures of community colleges (Acker, 2012). Women continue to be judged against these norms and find themselves in binds that keep them from leading authentically (Eddy, 2009; Embry et al., 2008). In this context, Tedrow and Rhoads’s (1999) observation is telling:

How can community colleges create organizational environments in which women’s ways of leading are fully embraced? If this can be accomplished, the energy that women expend in constructing complex survival strategies may be applied instead to other proactive concerns. (p. 15)

Danger exists in merely casting scenarios of all women or all men, as within both groups a continuum exists regarding approaches to leading and the need for support in these demanding positions. “Undoing gender” (Deutsch, 2007, p. 122) can provide a means to use social interactions to reduce gender differences and resist keeping individuals in gendered boxes. Critically, it is important to recognize the fluid nature of gender in order to move past traditional binaries.
On an encouraging note, Martin (2013) found that when women comprise a tipping point of community college leaders in a state (around 40%), real change in structure and culture begins to occur. In Maryland, the site of Martin’s research, a perfect storm of events occurred to create the context in which the increase in women leaders emerged. First, the state council proactively worked to open promotion opportunities for women. Second, when the tipping point occurred, less questioning of women as leaders followed. Indeed, the state boasts 63% women leaders in their community college system, well above the national average of 33% (ACE, 2012). Third, dual career challenges were easier to address because many of the community colleges in Maryland are located near metropolitan areas, making it easier for the partners of women presidents to more readily find professional work. Finally, a wide net was cast when identifying potential leadership talent.

Despite the promise of examples like in Maryland, our review of the literature found that there continues to remain the notion of the ideal worker in top-level leadership positions in community colleges (Acker, 2012). In our analysis, we found several instances of the continued expectation that leaders will have no responsibilities other than work and would keep their work and home lives separate, and will ideally have a partner or spouse who will take care of their personal needs (Acker, 1990). Consider how Leist (2007) noted, “The expectation that a rural community college president must be both accessible and visible can create issues; most notably, never being able to escape from the job and its pressures” (p. 315). Dedication to the job is the expectation for top-level leaders that are modeled on the masculine/hero norm. The movement to more participatory leadership may eventually result in a shift in these expectations, but in times of crisis, campus members often look to presidents to take on the role of hero (Leslie & Fretwell, 1996; Wilson & Cox, 2012).
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One of the reasons for the continued acceptance of the masculine norm in community colleges could be the paucity of problematizing of the literature that we discovered in our analysis. When the literature was critiqued in the articles we reviewed, the underlying subtexts regarding gender norms was highlighted (Acker, 2012). We noticed that the problematizing only occurred when a feminist lens was used to examine previous research. We concur with Allan (2010) that discourses are powerful in that they not only reflect but construct reality, therefore, community college leadership scholars carry a measure of responsibility in questioning structures that keep women from thriving as leaders. Scant problematizing of literature points to a sense of complacency and satisfaction with the status quo regarding the construction of community college leadership and current practices and policies that create the subtexts underlying the construct (Acker, 2012). When the status quo favors masculine norms and practices over acceptance of women, even when women write on leadership, no change occurs in how we envision the individuals who can lead community colleges.

Related to the issue of problematizing the literature is our observation that the bulk of writing on gender issues in community college leadership is done by women, as indeed women comprised the majority of authors or co-authors in the journal articles reviewed over the past 25 years. Despite this prominence of women as authors, the vast majority of writing about community college leadership reinforced narrow ideals of work, how we think about leadership, and who we think can fill these roles. Gendered organizations are an issue that impacts everyone, however, our review of scholarly literature on community college leadership found that when we have only women writing about women’s experiences in leadership we run the risk of reducing discussions of women’s leadership to a women’s-only issue and this focus strictly on cisgender women misses an opportunity to truly envision alternative voices of leaders. In our
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sample, a handful of male writers have collaborated with women on articles investigating gendered organizational structures and leadership, and have questioned masculine normed assumptions. Although commendable, these cases were rare. In part, legitimacy is lent to an issue depending on the number of voices heard reinforcing these new ideals. Here, if male authors and researchers are silent on the issue of women’s leadership, the topic is not viewed as important to the larger profession or is relegated to the sidelines as an issue for women only.

In using a feminist framework, we were intentional to focus on the voices of women and on their experiences. This attention highlighted several issues remaining in the community college literature. Importantly, our focus was on women and not on the full gender spectrum. First, we found no writing commenting on cisgender orientations or on leaders identifying in ways other than man or woman. This area of inquiry needs further attention. Second, in putting women at the center of this research, we found that women are conscious of the choices they are required to make in seeking top-level leadership positions and the boundary crossing required based on the subtext of the policies and practices in place (Acker, 2012). This boundary crossing comes at a real cost to authenticity and to life balance.

In her 2013 book *Lean In*, Sheryl Sandberg argued that part of the reason we do not see more women in leadership positions is because they take themselves out of the running and out of consideration for top level positions. Indeed, VanDerLinden (2004) found that women were less likely to pursue advanced degrees and professional development. But, VanDerLinden also concluded that who was tapped to seek advancement influenced ascension in the leadership ranks. Thus, institutions must consider the ways in which they are culpable for the lack of women leaders due to organizational culture (Acker, 2012), practices of identifying future leadership talent, and the promotion structure (Eddy & Ward, 2017). Alternative voices are still
emerging in community college discourse, but leadership exemplars and models remain
doggedly attached to norms with a singular focus on work (Acker, 2012).

The ubiquitous ideal worker. This research found that discourse supporting an ideal
work norm that privileges work above all other life events is still prevalent in the literature.
What has changed over time, however, is that many overtly masculine descriptions of leadership
have moved beyond heroes and warriors. But, the subtle language and subtext supporting
masculine ideal worker norms persists (Acker, 2012). Indeed, writers on community college
leadership are often complicit in keeping this norm alive and well when they do not question the
norms portrayed in literature reviews supporting current studies. Allan, Gordon, and Iverson’s
concluded,

Discourses of masculinity and professionalism, supported by a dominant discourse of
autonomy, produce the leader as tyrant and leader as expert and beneficiary respectively.
The intersection of masculinity and professionalism discourses produces the leader as
hero. If the masculinity discourse is the more prominent, the hero subject position takes
the form of leader as warrior. If the professionalism discourse is drawn upon more
heavily, the hero-leader emerges as the statesman. The discourse of relatedness emerges
as an alternative to the dominant discourse of autonomy. The relatedness discourse
produces the leader as facilitator subject position while the negotiator emerges from the
intersection of the autonomy and relatedness discourses. (p. 58, italics in original)

In this case, a dilemma occurs in which leadership is constructed as having power over others
and operating from a traditional authoritative position, whereas the reality of modern day
leadership relies instead on the need for collaboration and drawing in of all talent (Eddy et al.,
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2015). The continuation of the myth of singular, hero-like leaders belies the needs of community colleges to address complex challenges through collaborative leadership and has the potential to set up aspiring leaders with unobtainable expectations.

Nidiffer’s (2001) notion of integrated leadership purports to bring together the best features of traditional, often essentialist, masculine and feminine approaches to leadership. Indeed, research by Embry and colleagues (2008) found that men using feminine styles were evaluated more positively, yet only women rated females more positively when they used a masculine style. The bias of masculine norms as the gold standard is one held strongly by women about what it takes to reach the corner office (Acker, 2012; Williams, 2000). Yet, differentials exist in the selection of leaders based on gender, with context dictating expectations (Gipson, Pfaff, Mendelsohn, Catenacci, & Burke, 2017). The more an inclusive context is created in the community college sector, the more leaders along the gender continuum will enter the leadership ranks (Martin, 2013).

We argue that the language of leadership is critical (Fairhurst, 2011) and that moves to re-vision community college leadership remain undone. The increase in alternative voices in the literature is encouraging, but Amey and Twombly’s (1992) initial hope that these alternative voices would provide change did not occur in the 25 years since their writing. True, women are more present in the leadership positions, but they are still in a minority in presidential roles (33%; ACE, 2012), and those in the stepping stone position of Chief Academic Officer indicate no desire to move up (Eckel et al., 2009). Arguably, women make it to top positions by adopting the norms of their male predecessors, even though there is now more rhetoric regarding participatory leadership.
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The all-encompassing nature of top-leadership positions has accelerated over the past 25 years (Bunting, 2004). Academic leadership is often viewed as untenable and incompatible with work-life balance (DeZure et al., 2014). A culture of overwork is compounded by the ways in which technology allows individuals to be constantly connected to work (Wajcman, 2015). When the choice becomes work or family, many potential leaders opt out (ACE, 2012; Sandberg, 2013; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2017). Over the past 25 years, the discourse of community college leadership still revolves around the ideal worker, legitimating the idea of the mythical disembodied leader (Acker, 1990, 2012).

Future directions. In order to move forward to an actual re-visioning of community college leadership, we need to think of the leadership concerns identified as not merely a women’s issue, but a leadership issue. The increased presence of participatory leadership provides indication that we may be witnessing some change. With more and more women entering the discourse, the shift in the language is certainly noticeable, however, the discourse is still situated in the literature normed on the ideal worker. We believe that this aspect of the discourse will change as we reach a critical mass of women leaders as well as women leadership scholars.

It is important to learn more about how gendered conceptions of leadership are reinforced throughout the institution. Increasing the bandwidth of research on leadership in community colleges, by including perspectives of mid-level leaders and a broader conception of gender identities beyond the binaries, will create new understandings of critical elements in community college leadership and more importantly, broader perceptions of who can be a leader in the two-year sector. How you think as a leader in the middle ranks of the college influences how you think at the top and what you expect, yet few articles on leadership in the middle were found, and
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no articles on leaders with different gender identities. Likewise, how followers reify leadership performance contributes to leader expectations, yet scant attention to this area of research exists.

One aspect that is entirely absent in the literature is the exploration of the gender spectrum in community college leadership. Since the discourse has certainly shifted with respect to female cisgender leaders, we are optimistic that in the future, the discourse will be more inclusive of everyone on the gender spectrum in response to the wider political and cultural changes occurring in the United States. However, we must offer the caution that as long as research is grounded in unquestioned and uncritical reviews of masculine normed leadership literature, the change in discourse will be an inordinately slow process. Hope emerges when a tipping point is reached of women in top-level leadership positions, as Martin’s (2013) study in Maryland illustrated.

Conclusion

We conclude that a shifting tide is underway in how gender is conceived in community college leadership, but we have not reached a tipping point and work remains to be done. For real change to occur, scholars/writers need to begin to problematize the literature they use to situate their research and highlight the ways in which gender subtexts in the literature reinforces a gendered logic in community colleges (Acker, 2012). Instead of accepting at face value previous literature that favors masculine norms, authors should contextualize previous research and challenge the information presented. As well, we need to be more inclusive in our language and recognize when unquestioned norms favor an ideal worker. Our findings point to a gendered micro-discourse just under the surface that would be easy to miss if a feminist lens was not employed. Just as Acker (2012) pointed out the less visible gender subtexts in organizations, we argue that this micro-discourse can be sinister because unlike the clearly masculine language of
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hero leadership in Amey and Twombly’s (1992) study, it is not easily recognizable as gendered discourse.

We all are hurt when the disembodied worker is de rigueur within the organization. The toll of this continued construction of work is evident in the number of chief academic officers indicating they do not want to seek a presidency because of the demands of the job (Eckel et al., 2009). This loss of talent is particularly acute as we seek to fill leadership positions due to retirements. In addition, those who rise to the top may not bring new ideas or conceptions of leadership if the reason they have advanced is because they have played by the rules, which have decidedly favored ideal worker norms. Here, advancement is based on unquestioning acceptance of the gendered logic of institutions (Acker, 2012). Equally distressing is the fact that most discourse on leadership in the two-year sector fails to critique frameworks of existing leadership theories, accepting them at face value and leaving unquestioned who is left out of consideration. Gender subtexts are merely accepted, which help reinforce continuance of ideal worker norms (Acker, 2012).

Yet, we remain optimistic as our analysis indicates an increase in participatory discourse regarding leadership over time and an awareness that the complexity of today’s community college requires changes in leadership. We would hope that when an analysis such as ours is conducted 25 years hence that our findings and those of Amey and Twombly (1992) are viewed as passé — instead new conceptions of leadership will be inclusive and collaborative, there will be greater attention to work-life integration for all leaders and workers across the gender spectrum, and work structures will change to allow for more authentic work.
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