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## Educating Rhetorical Leaders<sup>1</sup>

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The history of American higher education shows its propensity to respond to contextual challenges in order to equip "students to be the hypothetical 'good citizens' of an era, that is, to enter society prepared to meet the needs of the times in which they live" (Altman, 1996, p. 371). However, what constitutes pressing social needs and civic responsibilities fluctuates and constantly must be redefined and renegotiated between educational institutions and larger society (Astin, 1998). Twenty-first century conditions require capable citizen leaders "who may or may not have positions of authority, but who inspire and motivate followers through persuasion, example, and empowerment, not through command and control" (Bryson & Crosby, 1992, p. 21). In a world where no single institution is "in charge," where power is shared, and where responsibility and information are diffused, the challenge is to find ways to facilitate wise communal choices and coordinate joint action (pp. xi, 4). Rhetoric, the ways in which symbols influence people and so create and exercise power, is key to leading or to critiquing leadership effectively in such circumstances. Critical management and analysis of meaning—and the preparation to recognize and seize the rhetorical moment—are the essence of leadership, argued Fairhurst and Sarr (1996, pp. 2, 10). Today American higher education's contract with society once again "is out of date and needs to be renegotiated...appropriate to the times" (Altman, 1996, p. 373).

As argument scholars, we already are convinced of the practicality of a rhetorical education in any era, but many others are not. Current conditions create an opportunity to convince the doubters, especially those with decision-making power in the academy, that instituting and supporting an integrated program of rhetorical leadership education serves their interests and society's and is part of higher education's responsibility. Current conditions (e.g., information access, fluid organizations) create various opportunities not only for civic and social participation but also for *leadership*. However, social inequities of position (e.g., class, gender, race) and power (e.g., resources, status, formal authority) persist. A rhetorical leadership program helps level the playing field by helping those who enjoy fewer social privileges build a critically reflexive perspective, skills and sensibilities to take advantage of opportunities to lead for the common good. It aims to teach citizens not only leadership skills but also to critically consider the context of a society that seems to desire leaders and why this predilection can, and does, go awry. This essay summarizes the program structure and arguments that garnered formal approval for University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's (UWM) 15-credit post-baccalaureate certificate in Rhetorical Leadership, which graduated its first student in 2004. Our arguments may be useful to other academics and administrators who seek to institutionalize a recognized core of courses for preparing rhetorically adept citizen leaders.

### Sample Program Structure

Efforts to establish a graduate-level Rhetorical Leadership Certificate in UWM's Communication Department began in earnest in 2001 after a more ambitious

attempt to create an interdisciplinary undergraduate rhetorical leadership program languished in the 1990s. The motivation to develop a rhetorical leadership specialty at any level grew from UWM's mission as an engaged urban campus combined with recognition that civic engagement skills do not emerge naturally for most people. The graduate certificate, which includes only a subset of all the graduate rhetoric courses we offer, can be earned separately or in conjunction with an advanced degree. Applicants may, but need not, have Communication or English undergraduate degrees, and they include educators, a paralegal involved with domestic violence and hate crimes, and students interested in faith-based social action as well as local political endeavors. Through an integrated core of rhetorical knowledge, practice and exemplars, we systematically prepare participants to function in today's flexible civic, religious, business and educational arenas.

UWM's program consists of five required courses. "Rhetorical Leadership and Ethics" addresses rhetoric's role in and potential for responsible leadership in multiple arenas. In addition to reading standard "leadership" literature against rhetoric's civic and ethical tradition (e.g., Aristotle, Bitzer, Booth, Johnstone), we study admirable rhetorical exemplars (e.g., Ghandi, King) as well as successful but contemptible ones (e.g., Hitler). Students are encouraged to get involved in and analyze rhetorical leadership in real-life groups or organizations for their final projects. "Rhetorical Theory," the standard graduate offering, introduces certificate students to the two-millennia theoretical range of the rhetorical tradition (i.e., from Gorgias through Burke, Perelman and Foucault). "Communication and Social Order" examines how existing institutions and values get established and "naturalized" using rhetoric and how they thus can be challenged strategically through rhetoric. This course also examines how everyday communication reinforces or challenges social hierarchies of race, gender, class and sexuality as well as even politically active Americans' attempts to communicate as if they are apolitical. "Rhetorics of Constituting Communities and Social Controversy" addresses the rhetorical potential of collective memories, naming and redefinition as it examines controversies such as those over abortion, labor, and civil and Native American rights. "Argumentation in Theory and Practice" integrates advanced argumentative theory with skills practice, which is unusual at a graduate level. It can involve service learning, and traditional argumentation theory classes are not allowed to substitute for it.

## Key Arguments

### New Conditions Demand Educational Changes

Today such a rhetorical leadership education is the height of practicality and heuristicity. Two developments make it seem that democracy *should* be flourishing: a dramatic increase in readily accessible information and a replacement of rigid, vertical, top-down organizations with temporary, horizontal, more fluid ones (see Slater & Bennis, 1964/1990; Bennis, 1990). Sipchen (1999) characterized the expansion of opportunities:

That technology and globalization have spurred cataclysmic change is a given among leadership devotees, some of whom contend that it has never been tougher to lead.... What unites the tangle of current approaches is the notion that future power will be dispersed more "horizontally" than in the old top-down, command/control model, that there must be more focus on relationships and coalitions and that leaders must develop lightning reflexes in a world where flux and ambiguity are the only constants. (p. 10)

The trend toward temporary project teams and individuals serving finite or part-time leadership roles on specific issues—then being followers on other collaborative pursuits—is even more prevalent outside for-profit circles. Life's pressures make one more likely to assume a term-limited committee chair at one's church or synagogue, rally a particular protest for one's neighborhood environmental group, or volunteer to head a project at one's own child's school than to become a full-time leader on any front. This openness is necessary, but not sufficient to encourage responsible widespread empowerment. The changes only yield greater democratic practice if less fortunate participants are equipped to take advantage of them.

Because the resulting "boundaryless" configurations no longer have power and authority differences so hardwired into the system, "opportunities for confusion and conflict abound"; in such shifting contexts, "creating the right kind of relationships at the right time is the key to productivity, innovation, and effectiveness" (Hirschhorn & Gilmore, 1992, pp. 5–6). Taking the risk of actively sharing and managing the meaning of confusing situations for and with others who have a stake in the outcome is the constant of leadership, argued Fairhurst and Sarr (1996, p. 2). An appreciation of rhetoric is key to more and more diverse participants maximizing the potential of this context for the common good. An article in *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* claimed that

leadership is realized in the process whereby one or more individuals succeeds in attempting to frame and define the reality of others...and in so doing enact a system of shared meaning that provides a basis for organized action. (Smircich & Morgan, 1982, p. 258)

Effective leadership relies not only on one's ability to make meaningful, shared sense of complexities, but also on one's rhetorical ability to demonstrate credibility, identify with others and coach cooperative action.

### Leadership is Everyone's Business

Under twenty-first century conditions, leaders are not predetermined. Instead, many individuals have the opportunity, if they choose and are prepared, to galvanize people toward common goals and actions in one arena or another of daily life (Morse, 1992, pp. 72–73). America has failed to meet its leadership challenges partly because of an allegiance to a dated view of what a leader is:

All too often the popular concept of leader has to do with people who are in positions of power or moral authority. It eludes the situations and people who need it most; those who carry on the business of living, working, guiding families, and making society work. No president, prime minister, or general can do that for us. (p. 71)

Responsible leadership must be cultivated especially by women, people of color and those without positions of formal authority as well as among those who traditionally have held such roles (see Gilbreath, in Capowski, 1994). Hirschhorn and Gilmore (1992) observed the urgency of drawing on difference: "As traditional boundaries disappear, establishing such differences [of authority, talent, or perspective] becomes simultaneously more important and more difficult. Flexibility depends on maintaining a creative tension among widely different but complementary skills and points of view" (p. 6). Recent conditions require a view that recognizes "there are no chosen few. Rather there are skills, abilities, and circumstances that call on all to perform the leadership function" (Morse, 1992, p. 72).

Several factors require a shift from standard perspectives on leadership

education. The complexity of Americans' lives means that each person may play a host of social roles such as citizen, worker, family representative, congregant, volunteer, neighborhood member, social activist. In these roles, one sometimes leads and sometimes follows, often changing functions by issue or group. Deciding whether and when to assert a leadership role and knowing how to go about it are not automatic. Rhetorical leadership education prepares one for moving dynamically within and among complementary roles by critically attending to the interactive symbolic processes at the nexus of

the constructions and actions of both leaders and led. It involves a complicity or process of negotiation through which certain individuals, implicitly or explicitly, surrender their power to define the nature of the experience to others.... While in certain circumstances the leader's image of reality may be hegemonic, as in the case of charismatic or totalitarian leaders who mesmerize their followers, this is by no means always the case. For the phenomenon of leadership in being interactive is by nature dialectical.... [L]eadership involves a process of defining reality in ways that are sensible to the led. (Smircich & Morgan, 1982, pp. 258–59)

The resulting collaborative meaning acts as a shared reference point for both leaders and followers to coordinate their understanding of a situation and appropriate actions (p. 261). Rhetorical sensibilities also constitute a critical antidote to manipulation through charisma or totalitarianism when these trained people are followers.

#### Existing Programs are Not Adequate

Shared-power situations require leaders who rely less on traditional military, bureaucratic and social science assumptions and more on the flexible art of rhetoric. Bryson and Crosby (1992) opened *Leadership for the Common Good*:

We live in a world where no one is "in charge." No one organization or institution has the legitimacy, power, authority, or intelligence to act alone on important public issues and still make substantial headway against the problems that threaten us all. No one is in charge when it comes to the greenhouse effect, AIDS, homelessness, the federal deficit, declining inner cities, drug abuse, domestic violence, or a host of other public problems. Many organizations or institutions are involved, affected, or have a partial responsibility to act, and the information necessary to address public issues is incomplete and unevenly distributed among the involved organizations. As a result, we live in a "shared-power" world, a world in which organizations and institutions must share objectives, activities, resources, power, or authority in order to achieve collective gains or minimize losses. (p. xi)

Leaders who address collective problems must

find ways to think and act more effectively in shared-power contexts. They must sharpen their understanding of how power, change, and leadership relate. They must view the shared-power world's demands for widely shared leadership as opportunities, not barriers. And they must discover how leaders can enhance their effectiveness when they cannot rely on command, but instead must use more indirect means. (pp. 4–5)

"To lead," declared Rowe (1998), "is to help others to move forward and to move ahead. To lead is to guide by persuasion."

Older, top-down leadership models assume a leader's control of information access. Such models draw their assumptions and structures largely from "the

antiquated system of the military” (Slater & Bennis, 1964/1990, p. 168). Significant advances in widely-accessible technology have eroded, if not destroyed, exclusive control over key information. The challenge now is more likely to be an excess of (sometimes questionable) information than data’s scarcity. Sustainable leadership is no longer a matter of controlling scarce information, but of facilitating rhetoric that critically sifts the data, determines its relevance and formulates it into a mutually acceptable justification for choosing among probable alternatives. Further, the traditional military leader’s authority to make unilateral decisions and enforce unquestioning obedience is inappropriate for most social settings.

Additionally, social science and most leadership training programs built on it focus on the norm or the most probable occurrences, a bias not always helpful to leadership in action. As Fairhurst and Sarr (1996) noted, effective “leaders at any level must communicate spontaneously—anytime, anywhere. They must know how to handle a wide range of people and situations in split-second moments of opportunity, when there is no time for carefully scripted speeches” (1996, p. 10). Social science aims to predict, explain and control regularities. Its methods and the training programs based on them focus on probabilities, aggregate trends and the greatest possible degree of generalizability; the not-yet-existent possibility, novel or unpredictable combinations and unique details or anomalies are de-centered in favor of the usual. As valuable as social science is, education in a comprehensive rhetorical approach offers an essential complement for potential leaders. Fleming (1998) elaborated,

The counterpart to art (theory, norm) is practical sensitivity to particulars. In rhetorical education, this has typically meant at least three things: first, a reminder to speakers and writers that every communicative situation is unique and demands, therefore, thorough investigation of the “special” nature of the case at hand; second, the injunction to “know” as much as one can about one’s own community—its history, literature, laws, culture, and so forth; and third an awareness that the desired skills and dispositions of rhetoric are developed primarily through observation, imitation, and exercise.... Finally, rhetorical education not only needs art for isolation of situations and resources, and practice to internalize the art, it also needs inquiry—historical, philosophical, and empirical—to keep the art honest.... So seen, rhetoric is a study that—in addition to imparting an art and guiding good practice—encourages critical and substantive reflection about the situated relations of discourse to reason, character, and community in human action. (pp. 183–184)

Responsibly used, rhetoric dialogically generates a palette of practical answers that speak to a particular situation, rather than searching for a single, unilateral or “normal” answer.

### **Refuting Likely Counter-Arguments**

The two most likely reservations about instituting comprehensive rhetorical leadership education at universities involve risk and resources. First is the recurring fear that those trained in rhetoric will become manipulative and dogmatic. It is an objection as old as the recognition of rhetoric’s socio-political power. Aristotle (trans. 1926) himself refuted it as a “misuse” charge that applies equally to other good and useful powers; he trusted critically sensitive lay citizens to perceive abuse *as long as* a range of viable viewpoints are represented by skilled rhetors (I.i.12–13). This objection explains why it is crucial for a rhetorical leadership education to survey all sides of the

enduring struggle over rhetoric's social role. A rhetorical education at its best resists unjust "coercion through a liberalizing of the mind," achieved in part "by teaching the willingness and the wit to argue both for and for that matter *all* sides, never avoiding the advocacy of the very side the dogmatics would suppress" (Sloane, 1989, p. 472). Given rhetoric's underpinnings, those *without* thorough, theoretically grounded rhetorical training are more likely to manipulate decision-making or refuse accountability than those with it.

A second likely reservation concerns whether there might not be an easier shortcut to civic-minded leadership training. It is precisely the functional need for a *thorough* rhetorical education that trumps this objection. The endless spate of weekend leadership retreats and "how to lead" manuals available at any airport newsstand suggest that the shortcuts are disappointing. Even when consistent with a *portion* of the rhetorical tradition, these alternatives cannot work because their static forms undermine the indispensable attributes of dynamism and adaptability required for successful leadership. Learning to lead rhetorically cannot be done in isolation and is enhanced by a theoretically grounded command of a broad range of rhetorical options as well as sustained, supervised practice in selecting among and adapting the symbolic possibilities to diverse, yet particular situations.

## Conclusion

In *The Good Society*, Bellah and his co-authors (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1991) called for a return to rhetoric as the discipline that always has tended toward clarity in times of tumult. In spite of such public invitations and rhetoric's renewed theoretical cache at the twentieth century's end, in practice rhetorical education has yet to be reclaimed, even by the academy (Fleming, 1998, p. 169). This essay proposes an integrated rhetorical curriculum for contemporary, humanities-based leadership preparation and rehearses the pivotal arguments for why rhetorical leadership should be one of higher education's top priorities as it renegotiates its social contract with the American citizenry. Such an education could empower diverse individuals and answer society's "need to stretch beyond the few and embrace the talents and contributions of the many" (Morse, 1992, p. 77). Hopefully, argument scholars can lead the charge to convince their universities to accept the "responsibility to train students to embody the skills necessary to make the general life of our societies more civil—that is, more peaceful through reasoned discourse" (Hauerwas, 1988, p. 21).

## Notes

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