

Invisible Leadership in Higher Education: Rethinking Power, Purpose, and Progress

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Abstract

This article examines the often-overlooked phenomenon of “invisible leadership” in higher education—where faculty and staff lead innovation and advance institutional goals without formal authority or recognition. Using distributed leadership and organizational change theories, it critiques risk-averse administrators who hinder progress through inaction or performative leadership. Through case studies and analysis, the article explores the emotional toll of unsupported innovation and the exclusion of marginalized voices. It offers practical recommendations to empower faculty, streamline decision-making, and align institutional structures with mission-driven values—calling for greater recognition of invisible leadership to build inclusive, agile institutions.

Keywords

Invisible Leadership, Higher Education, Distributed Leadership, Organizational Change, Critical Leadership Studies, Gatekeeping in Academia

1. Introduction

In today’s rapidly evolving landscape of higher education, the demand for visionary leadership has never been greater. Universities are expected to respond to global challenges, foster innovation, strengthen international collaborations, and create inclusive environments that serve diverse student populations. Yet, despite these growing imperatives, many institutions remain bogged down by bureaucratic inertia and risk-averse cultures that stifle creativity and hinder progress. At the heart of this contradiction lies a critical and underexamined dynamic: the role of “invisible leadership.”

Invisible leadership refers to the informal, often unrecognized efforts of faculty, staff, and mid-level administrators who take initiative, solve problems, and create value for the institution—without formal authority or acknowledgment. They of-

ten prefer to avoid the spotlight, valuing meticulous work and responsibility over recognition (Zweig, 2014). These individuals, driven by a deep sense of purpose, often find themselves navigating around institutional gatekeepers: senior leaders whose authority is rarely matched by proactive support or strategic vision. Invisible leaders create value and drive success through their actions rather than their titles. They demonstrate integrity, focus on results, and fulfill organizational value promises (Edinger & Sain, 2015). Their leadership is characterized by skill, patience, and resilience, particularly when their contributions may go unrecognized (Tomkins, 2019). The concept of invisible leadership challenges traditional notions of visible, heroic leaders, and emphasizes the importance of distributed, shared, and inclusive leadership models (Tomkins, 2019). When leadership becomes performative rather than participatory, progress is delayed or derailed, and the true architects of innovation remain hidden in plain sight.

This phenomenon is not simply anecdotal. Across campuses, we observe faculty independently cultivating international partnerships, securing grants, organizing academic events, and designing transformative programs—all in alignment with the university's mission. Yet, when they seek institutional endorsement for their efforts, they encounter barriers: delayed signatures, resistance to unfamiliar ideas, or outright refusals with little justification (Shadle et al., 2017). These moments reveal a growing disconnect between the work being done and the leadership that should be enabling it.

The consequences of this disconnect are profound. Promising collaborations with foreign universities are lost. Funding opportunities tied to innovative proposals expire. Faculty morale is a critical factor in academic life and diminishes as their contributions are ignored or undermined (Hebert, 2019). Most troubling of all, students—the ultimate beneficiaries of higher education—miss out on experiences and opportunities that could transform their academic and professional trajectories.

Despite these challenges, invisible leaders persist. They adapt their strategies, leverage their networks, and pursue alternate pathways to achieve their goals. Their resilience and creativity are testaments to the potential of decentralized leadership models—models that empower initiative rather than enforce hierarchy. Decentralized leadership models that empower initiative rather than enforce hierarchy have shown potential for improving organizational performance and employee engagement (Huettermann et al., 2024).

The actions prompt us to ask: Who is really leading our institutions? And what happens when formal leaders abdicate their roles as facilitators of progress?

This article seeks to address the following research questions:

- 1) What are the characteristics and behaviors of invisible leaders in higher education?
- 2) How do institutional gatekeepers hinder innovation, and what motivates their resistance?
- 3) What are the professional and emotional impacts of leadership inaction on

faculty and staff?

4) How can higher education institutions better recognize and support decentralized, initiative-based leadership?

These questions are essential for rethinking how leadership is conceptualized, practiced, and rewarded within academia. They also invite a reevaluation of accountability at the senior leadership level. If those at the top are not actively enabling institutional progress, should they continue to be regarded as leaders—or merely gatekeepers?

To answer these questions, this article draws on insights from distributed leadership theory, organizational change theory, and critical leadership studies. Distributed leadership theory, in particular, provides a compelling framework for understanding how leadership can emerge from multiple levels within an organization, especially in contexts where formal leaders fail to act. It recognizes that leadership is not solely the purview of individuals with positional authority but is instead a dynamic and collective process shaped by context, relationships, and action. Unlike other forms of leadership, distributed leadership is primarily concerned with the interactive and interdependent practice of leadership rather than the roles and responsibilities of those who have a formally assigned leadership position (Sol, 2021). Organizational change theory further highlights the tension between innovation and resistance within hierarchical structures. This perspective acknowledges the connection between perceptions of change as potentially harmful and resultant resistance behaviors, suggesting a more balanced approach to organizational change theory (Zorn & Scott, 2021). It helps explain why some individuals within academic institutions feel empowered to lead while others use their authority to maintain the status quo. When institutions privilege risk avoidance over responsiveness, they inadvertently disincentivize the very forms of leadership they claim to support. Research suggests that institutions often prioritize risk avoidance over responsiveness, hindering effective leadership (Andersen & Young, 2023). Critical leadership studies add a necessary lens of power and politics to this discussion, examining how gatekeeping behaviors are often masked by language of “policy”, “procedure”, or “institutional alignment”. Critical Leadership Studies (CLS) offer an alternative perspective on leadership by examining power dynamics, context, and follower resistance often overlooked in conventional approaches (Collinson, 2018; Collinson & Tourish, 2015). CLS challenge the notion that power should be concentrated in a few leaders, exploring the dysfunctional consequences of such dynamics (Collinson & Tourish, 2015). These discourses can obscure the real motivations behind obstruction: fear of disruption, personal insecurity, or lack of understanding of emerging opportunities. These conflicts can result in innovation dilemmas, struggles for organizational actorhood, and identity conflict (Hattke et al., 2016). Together, these theoretical perspectives allow us to understand invisible leadership not as a fringe phenomenon, but as a central feature of how modern academic institutions operate. They also illuminate the urgent need for cultural and structural change—change that

acknowledges and empowers those who are already doing the work of leadership, even if they do not hold the title. The combination of technique, restraint, understanding and resilience brings into the conversation that invisibility is an art. To understand leaders' art-work in practice, Tomkins writes that the relationship between the leader we apparently see and the less visible work of those who make it happen, makes the invisible leader's efforts and experiences more, not less, significant (Tomkins, 2019).

In the pages that follow, we explore case studies, personal narratives, and institutional patterns that bring this dynamic into sharp focus. We examine how invisible leaders navigate institutional barriers, the consequences of unsupported innovation, and strategies for transforming academic culture to better align with the values of equity, excellence, and engagement. In doing so, we invite higher education leaders at all levels to reflect critically on their own roles—and to consider whether they are enabling or obstructing the future of their institutions.

2. Theoretical Framework

To better understand the dynamics of invisible leadership in higher education, this article is anchored in three interrelated theoretical lenses: distributed leadership theory, organizational change theory, and critical leadership studies. These frameworks collectively illuminate how invisible leaders operate, how resistance to change manifests within academic institutions, and how power and positionality influence institutional decision-making.

3. Distributed Leadership Theory

Distributed leadership is complex, involving factors such as institutional mission, diverse roles, communication challenges, and academic values (Floyd & Fung, 2017).

This theory acknowledges that faculty, staff, and mid-level administrators often exercise leadership in ways that are context-specific, collaborative, and responsive to institutional needs—even without formal authority. Distributed leadership theory is especially useful for identifying how “invisible” leaders navigate organizational spaces to achieve meaningful outcomes, often filling gaps left by disengaged or risk-averse formal leaders.

Distributed leadership is a popular concept in educational leadership and is conceived as a collective social process emerging through the interactions of multiple actors. In particular it is a notion and strategy that has seen a rapid growth in the context of decentralization of education systems (Shava & Tlou, 2018).

Distributed leadership is less about the idea that everyone is a leader and more about a choice in attitude of leadership. It is a leader's attitude for a more collaborative form of leadership that embraces diversity and good governance, while recognizing the complexities of informed and effective decision-making or organizational agility.

According to Chatwani (2018), distributed leadership is a hybrid form of lead-

ership, engaging followers in all or parts of the organization demonstrating inclusive leadership that respects formal power and the individual leader is observed. It illustrates the followership–leadership dichotomy, one that is complementary and of mutual engagement.

Importantly, distributed leadership does not suggest a flat or leaderless organization; rather, it encourages a rethinking of how leadership is enacted and recognized. In higher education, this approach allows for the examination of informal, organic leadership that often emerges in moments of institutional need, especially when formal leaders are constrained by bureaucratic pressures, competing interests, or limited vision. This is particularly relevant in complex, decentralized institutions such as universities, where silos and layered governance structures often create ambiguity about who holds responsibility for innovation and change.

In the context of invisible leadership, distributed leadership theory offers a robust explanation for how and why certain faculty members become catalysts for transformation. These individuals often lead out of necessity rather than ambition—responding to unmet institutional goals, student needs, or emerging opportunities. What distinguishes them is not their title or job description but their agency, capacity to mobilize others, and willingness to assume responsibility without being asked. These leaders may not operate with a public platform, but they wield considerable influence through relationships, credibility and trust over time (The higher education sector operates in an increasingly complex global environment that is placing it under considerable stress and resulting in widespread change to the operating context and leadership of higher education institutions. The outcome has been the increased likelihood of conflict between academics and senior leaders, foretelling the need for more engaged and broader approach to leadership (Jones & Harvey, 2017). This is especially important at a time when institutions of higher learning need to adjust fast to things like new learning paradigms, shifting student demographics, and technology breakthroughs. The implementation of dispersed leadership has the potential to enhance organizational well-being by fostering a shared sense of accountability and responsibility, which is an essential component of institutional success and creativity (Elshan, 2024). Distributed leadership highlights how leadership is distributed not only across individuals but also across situations. Leadership can be temporal, emerging when circumstances require it and receding when the task is complete. This fluidity reflects the reality of academic life, where faculty must often oscillate between teaching, research, and service roles—adapting their leadership engagement accordingly. A faculty member who initiates a new international exchange program, for example, may step into a leadership role during its formation and implementation, even if they later hand off maintenance and coordination to others. The reality is that increasing acknowledgment that leadership needs to be dispersed across all levels of an organization in order to capitalize on the combined knowledge and perceptions of the academic community, rather than being restricted to upper management (Elshan, 2024).

Another critical aspect of distributed leadership is its sensitivity to context. Unlike universal leadership models that presume consistent traits or behaviors, distributed leadership is inherently adaptive. It accounts for the ways in which institutional culture, history, and structure shape how leadership is interpreted and performed. Distributed leadership fosters an environment of power-sharing, delegation, and collaboration, which builds trust and employee confidence (Soni et al., 2023). Similarly, in educational settings, distributed instructional leadership drives performance adaptation during policy innovation implementation through collective goal setting, instructional feedback, guided learning, and trusting relationships (Zuckerman et al., 2018). For example, in a university where top-down leadership is the norm, informal leaders may need to exert more effort to navigate formal channels and negotiate authority. Conversely, in more participatory environments, distributed leadership may flourish with fewer barriers.

This context-dependence is crucial for understanding how invisible leadership is simultaneously possible and precarious. Faculty who lead without formal endorsement often do so at personal and professional risk. Without the cover of institutional approval, they may face resistance, isolation, or administrative pushback—even when their work aligns with strategic priorities. Distributed leadership theory helps scholars and practitioners make sense of this paradox: that leadership can be both celebrated in rhetoric and suppressed in practice, depending on who is exercising it and how it is perceived by those in power (O'Connor et al., 2019). Recently, distributed leadership has also been linked to the promotion of equity and inclusion in academic institutions. By decentralizing authority and recognizing the contributions of individuals at all levels, distributed leadership creates space for marginalized voices to shape institutional direction. This is particularly relevant in the context of diversity initiatives, global engagement efforts, and interdisciplinary collaborations—all of which depend on buy-in and creativity from actors beyond the upper echelons of administration.

Distributed leadership theory aligns closely with transformational leadership principles, particularly the emphasis on vision, motivation, and the development of others. Invisible leaders often mentor colleagues, build coalitions, and advocate for systemic improvements—demonstrating a form of moral leadership that prioritizes institutional betterment over personal recognition. These traits are difficult to measure using traditional leadership metrics, but their impact is deeply felt by those who benefit from the initiatives launched and sustained through these quiet efforts (Adams-Robinson, 2021).

Critically, distributed leadership theory does not absolve formal leaders of responsibility. Instead, it encourages a rebalancing of power, where those in authority create enabling conditions for distributed leadership to flourish. This includes providing clear communication, access to resources, and symbolic recognition of grassroots leadership. When these conditions are absent, distributed leadership may still occur—but it will do so in opposition to the institution, rather than in partnership with it.

This tension—between enabling and obstructing distributed leadership—is at the heart of the invisible leadership phenomenon (Tomkins, 2019). Faculty members who persist in advancing institutional goals despite institutional barriers embody the very essence of distributed leadership. They do not wait for permission to lead; they recognize a need and act. And in doing so, they remind us that leadership is not bestowed by title, but affirmed by action.

Distributed leadership theory provides a powerful analytical framework for understanding the experiences of invisible leaders in academia. It challenges narrow definitions of leadership, values collaboration over control, and recognizes the potential of every institutional member to contribute meaningfully to organizational change. For institutions striving to become more agile, inclusive, and innovative, embracing distributed leadership is not just a theoretical preference—it is a strategic necessity (Elshan, 2024)

4. Organizational Change Theory

While distributed leadership highlights how informal leaders emerge, organizational change theory helps explain why formal structures often resist these efforts. Classic and contemporary models of change management (Kezar, 2014) illustrate the obstacles that arise when innovation challenges established norms or power structures. Within academia, these barriers frequently manifest as administrative reluctance, risk aversion, and a persistent preference for procedural rigidity over agility. These institutional tendencies do not emerge in isolation—they are deeply rooted in organizational culture, historical precedent, and the leadership styles embedded within higher education institutions.

Organizational change theory provides a vital lens for understanding how change is introduced, interpreted, and either supported or resisted within institutions. In the context of higher education, this theory examines how structural inertia, legacy systems, and governance processes can impede or slow the progress of new initiatives—even those that are strategically aligned and mission-driven. Faculty-driven innovation often becomes entangled in layers of approval, unclear chains of responsibility, and conflicting interpretations of policy. If universities cannot adapt rapidly and effectively, they face the risk of becoming irrelevant or, at least, serving a diminished societal role in the future (Bouwma-Gearhart et al., 2021). The result is an institutional landscape where bold ideas are met not with enthusiasm but with administrative hurdles and procedural ambiguity.

One of the foundational contributions of organizational change theory is its articulation of change as a multi-stage process, rather than a one-time event. Kotter (1995)'s eight-step change model remains one of the most widely cited frameworks, emphasizing the need to establish a sense of urgency, build coalitions, communicate a vision, and institutionalize new approaches. In academic settings, however, this linear model often clashes with the realities of shared governance, where power is diffused, and decision-making processes are time-consuming and consensus-driven. As a result, efforts to implement change—espe-

cially those driven from outside formal leadership structures—struggle to gain traction without clear champions in senior roles.

Adding to this complexity, Kezar (2014) introduced the concept of adaptive change, which views transformation as a cultural and relational process that requires shifts in mindset and practice—not just structure. Kezar emphasizes the importance of trust, values alignment, and informal leadership networks in supporting sustainable change. This view is particularly useful for understanding invisible leadership, as it centers the human and cultural dimensions of change—areas where faculty, staff, and mid-level administrators often exert the most influence. The interplay between top-down administrative leadership and bottom-up faculty initiatives is crucial for successful organizational change, with institutional culture and context shaping this dynamic (Phillips & Snodgrass, 2022). Yet even in institutions that recognize the value of adaptive change, the dominance of bureaucratic logics can undermine grassroots momentum.

In institutions resistant to transformation, several recurring patterns emerge. First, there is often a misalignment between institutional rhetoric and action. Leadership may publicly endorse innovation or global engagement while simultaneously failing to support the very initiatives that embody these values. Despite campus initiatives promoting diversity and internationalization, significant inequalities persist, partly due to toxic leadership and supportive followers (Tietjen-Smith, 2020). The industrialization of academic work and managerial obsession with growth have corroded collegiality, leading to mistrust, anxiety, and burnout among faculty (Oleksiyenko, 2018). To address these issues, new leadership models are needed, including shared, creative, and dynamic leadership approaches that support innovation and sustainability (Whittaker & Montgomery, 2022). Implementing such changes requires rethinking evaluation practices and empowering all members of the academic community (Fritzsche et al., 2022).

This contradiction creates confusion and disillusionment among faculty who are expected to lead without being empowered—a bogus empowerment (Ciulla, 2020). Second, institutions may adopt a compliance-based mindset, where adherence to policy takes precedence over responsiveness to opportunity. This risk-averse orientation can be particularly damaging in moments that require agility, such as cultivating international partnerships, launching interdisciplinary programs, or piloting new pedagogical models.

Organizational change theory also points to the role of middle management in mediating change. In higher education, department chairs, associate deans, and directors often serve as the critical interface between senior administration and frontline faculty. Their capacity to interpret, translate, and implement change initiatives can determine whether innovation is supported or stalled. Unfortunately, in many cases, middle managers are caught in a paradox: expected to lead change while being constrained by the expectations and policies of their superiors. When middle management lacks clarity or autonomy, and does not improvise practices as one of the ways to cope with organizational dynamics, the institutional response

to innovation becomes inconsistent and unpredictable (Scaglione et al., 2019).

Another vital contribution of organizational change theory is its attention to resistance to change. Resistance is not inherently negative; it often stems from legitimate concerns about capacity, priorities, or unintended consequences. However, when resistance becomes habitual or ideological—when it is used reflexively to block new ideas without genuine evaluation—it transforms into gatekeeping. In the context of invisible leadership, this resistance is often coded in administrative language: requests for more data, appeals to policy, or deferrals to nonexistent committees. The concept of invisible leadership emerges as a complex interplay between administrative power, social construction, and community engagement. Heidelberg (2016) demonstrates how administrators' deep understanding of rules can be used invisibly to resist change. These tactics allow formal leaders to avoid making decisions while appearing to remain engaged, thereby preserving the status quo under the guise of due process.

The phenomenon of decision avoidance is particularly noteworthy in academic change processes. Unlike explicit rejections, which at least provide clarity, decision avoidance creates a liminal space where initiatives linger without resolution. For faculty innovators, this is one of the most demoralizing outcomes. The lack of feedback, timelines, or rationale leaves them uncertain of next steps and hesitant to reinvest their energy. Over time, this ambiguity erodes trust in institutional leadership and discourages further initiative.

This liminal space can be challenging, characterized by disorientation and loss of status, but also offers opportunities for growth and identity reformation. Academics may experience “permanent liminality” due to organizational changes, leading to complex identity negotiations (Winkler & Kristensen, 2021). Similarly, professionals in universities face role ambiguity and positional liminality as they operate between academic and professional spheres (Smith et al., 2021). Understanding and addressing liminality in higher education contexts is crucial for supporting quality student experiences and effective professional (Smith et al., 2021). When senior administrators are disengaged, indecisive, or overly focused on administrative preservation, they send signals that discourage innovation. Faculty members who might otherwise initiate change begin to self-censor or deprioritize their creative efforts, fearing that their work will be dismissed or ignored. Yet even in these contexts, informal leaders continue to operate. Organizational change theory helps explain how they do so—by working within informal networks, creating alternative structures, and framing their work in ways that align with institutional priorities while avoiding administrative scrutiny. These actors often develop “workarounds” to institutional resistance, such as forming cross-departmental collaborations, seeking external funding, or piloting initiatives under the radar. While these strategies reflect resilience and resourcefulness, they also highlight systemic failure: the fact that change is possible, but only by circumventing the institution rather than working through it. Researchers have explained that a person's resilience is not static, nor is it finite. According to Brammer (2020)

“Resilience appears to be an aspect of personality so powerfully influenced by experience that it is probably never too late to increase one’s resilience (p. 2). The theory also draws attention to feedback loops—mechanisms through which change efforts are evaluated, celebrated, or suppressed. Institutions that lack formal feedback mechanisms for grassroots initiatives often fail to recognize the value created by invisible leaders. This absence of acknowledgment not only demotivates the individual but deprives the institution of scalable models for future innovation. [Kashyap & Agrawal \(2019\)](#) found that positive relationships between policy, incentives, research facilities, and working culture. Their research highlights the importance of acknowledging and incentivizing individual contributions to drive innovation and research output in higher education. When positive outcomes go unrecognized, and only high-level initiatives receive institutional spotlight, a distorted narrative of leadership and progress emerges—one that excludes the contributions of those without title or visibility. Institutions should consider implementing recognition programs and revisiting policy frameworks to enhance motivation and foster a culture of innovation ([Saini & Chaudhary, 2019](#)).

Finally, organizational change theory invites us to consider the role of institutional memory and culture. In some universities, failed initiatives from the past cast long shadows over new proposals. Faculty are told, “we tried that once and it didn’t work,” without considering what has changed in the environment, tools, or partnerships since then. This kind of cultural residue acts as a cognitive barrier to change, reinforcing risk-aversion and discouraging experimentation. In such settings, invisible leaders not only face bureaucratic challenges but must also battle institutional narratives that privilege caution over creativity.

It is said in Greek history that Alexander the Great once came upon his philosopher hero Diogenes and asked him if there was anything he could do for him, to which Diogenes replied that he could stand away from blocking his sun. This apocryphal story is a near perfect metaphor for a consideration of one of the critical issues facing educational leadership in contemporary times. Let the shadow of Alexander the Great be the bureaucracy which shades and shapes our thinking, the way we prepare educational leaders, and a host of metaphors we use in describing who a leader is and what a leader is supposed to do ([Ehrich & English, 2024](#)).

In conclusion, organizational change theory provides an essential framework for analyzing the dynamics that facilitate or frustrate innovation in higher education. It clarifies why promising initiatives led by invisible leaders often stall—not due to lack of value or relevance, but because of organizational misalignment, cultural conservatism, and leadership ambivalence. Understanding these barriers equips us to challenge them. By identifying leverage points, developing responsive leadership practices, and creating enabling environments, institutions can begin to align their structures with their aspirations—allowing leadership at all levels to flourish.

5. Critical Leadership Studies

Finally, critical leadership studies (CLS) provide a necessary lens for interrogating the politics of leadership, power, and legitimacy within academic institutions. Unlike traditional leadership models that often seek to describe effective leadership through fixed traits or ideal behaviors, CLS explores how power relations, institutional norms, and social inequalities shape who is seen as a leader, whose voices are amplified, and whose contributions are rendered invisible. Scholars such as Lumby (2019) have underscored how leadership is not simply about what one does, but also about how one is perceived perceptions that are deeply influenced by factors such as race, gender, class, status, and positional authority.

In the context of invisible leadership, CLS becomes especially valuable because it shifts the focus from *what leadership is* to *who gets to lead and why*. It invites us to ask: who defines leadership in our institutions? Who benefits from current leadership paradigms, and who is excluded by them? These are not merely philosophical questions—they have real consequences for how innovation, equity, and agency unfold within university systems. When leadership recognition is tied too tightly to formal roles or administrative rank, it becomes easier for those in power to overlook or dismiss the labor of faculty and staff who lead from the margins (Montgomery, 2020)

One of the central contributions of critical leadership studies is its challenge to individualized and heroic models of leadership. Traditional frameworks often emphasize charismatic authority, strategic vision, or managerial competence as the hallmarks of effective leadership. While these traits are not without value, CLS argues that such definitions tend to privilege dominant identities—typically white, male, upper-class, and institutionally sanctioned—and overlook the collective and relational dimensions of leadership. As a result, the diverse, community-oriented leadership styles employed by many faculty of color, women, and first-generation scholars are undervalued or misrecognized. Problematizing the dichotomizing tendency in leadership studies, CLS also emphasizes the value of analyzing leadership power relations. Critical approaches address the asymmetric interplay between leaders, managers, followers and contexts as well as their potentially contradictory conditions, processes and consequences. By addressing the dialectics of power, conformity and resistance, critical perspectives challenge conventional understandings of leader-follower dynamics. In so doing they open up new ways of theorizing, researching and enacting leadership (Collinson, 2018).

This has significant implications for how universities evaluate and reward leadership. When leadership is equated with formal titles or visible outputs—such as major grants, administrative appointments, or large-scale institutional initiatives, the subtler forms of leadership practiced by faculty engaging in mentorship, advocacy, community partnerships, or cultural change are often marginalized. Yet these very activities are foundational to building equitable, student-centered, and mission-driven institutions. CLS provides theoretical tools to name this contradiction and to reimagine leadership in ways that are more just, inclusive, and re-

flective of the diverse contributions that sustain higher education.

A second key insight from CLS is the idea that leadership discourse is itself a site of power, and argues that leadership is an ambiguous concept, viewing discourse as a form of social practice with an internal, dialectical relationship to society (Fairclough, 2020; Brundy, 2018). The language used to describe, promote, or resist leadership carries implicit assumptions about legitimacy and authority. For example, the frequent invocation of “policy” and “compliance” in academic governance can function as a rhetorical shield—used not to maintain academic standards, but to deflect responsibility or silence dissent. In this sense, CLS helps reveal how administrative discourses are sometimes weaponized to preserve existing hierarchies and marginalize alternative visions of leadership. Research emphasizes the importance of understanding and addressing the invisibility of diverse leaders, as well as the systemic barriers and power dynamics that contribute to their discursive dismissal (Tomkins, 2019; Jefferies et al., 2018; Stephenson, 2020). This is especially relevant when examining the experience of invisible leaders who face discursive dismissal. Their initiatives are not always rejected outright, but rather subjected to endless rounds of review, reframing, or “alignment” with shifting institutional priorities. These tactics are often framed as neutral bureaucratic processes, but CLS encourages us to see them as forms of soft power—tools of exclusion that operate under the guise of due process. This obfuscation of power serves to protect institutional inertia while projecting an image of fairness and rationality.

Moreover, CLS draws attention to the concept of leadership as identity work—a dynamic interplay between how individuals see themselves and how they are seen by others in leadership contexts. Faculty members’ identities are multifaceted, encompassing professional, personal, and relational aspects that shape their experiences within academia (Pifer & Baker, 2016). Faculty who take initiative often do so from a place of deep identity investment, whether rooted in professional ethics, cultural commitments, or personal experience. Yet their efforts are frequently invalidated when they do not conform to institutional expectations of what leadership should look like. In such cases, leadership becomes not just a matter of doing, but of being recognized—a process that is often shaped more by institutional norms than by actual impact.

CLS also engages critically with the symbolic politics of leadership illuminating issues of power, control, and authenticity (Bendell et al., 2016). In universities, leadership is often performed through ceremonies, titles, and visibility rather than through substantive action. This performativity can mask a lack of engagement or accountability on the part of senior leaders, while simultaneously erasing the labor of those who are working behind the scenes. For example, when a university highlights a new international partnership in its strategic plan but fails to support the faculty who initiated and nurtured the relationship, it appropriates the outcomes without acknowledging the source. CLS invites us to question such symbolic appropriations and to demand more transparent and equitable forms of leadership

recognition.

Additionally, CLS intersects productively with intersectional theory, particularly in highlighting how marginalized individuals in academia must often navigate “double binds” when exercising leadership. An example is women leaders in academia face a “double bind” where they must navigate conflicting expectations and stereotypes. They are often expected to exhibit both stereotypically feminine traits (warmth, empathy) and masculine traits (assertiveness, ambition) to be perceived as effective leaders (Chikwe et al., 2024). Another example is women and faculty of color are frequently expected to serve on diversity committees, mentor underrepresented students, and lead community engagement efforts—all forms of leadership critical to institutional success—but these contributions are often undervalued in promotion and tenure processes. When these same individuals advocate for structural change, they may be labeled as “troublemakers” or “too political,” further marginalizing their leadership. CLS provides a framework for interpreting these patterns not as individual failings, but as systemic contradictions within academic culture.

In the context of this, CLS helps us understand how invisible leadership is not simply, but of institutional design and ideological framing. When universities equate leadership with managerialism, when they reward compliance over courage, and when they privilege hierarchy over collaboration, they marginalize the very individuals who are most invested in the institution’s mission. Critical leadership studies challenge us to confront these uncomfortable truths and to imagine alternative leadership logics—ones that affirm solidarity, social justice, and shared agency.

One of the most powerful contributions of CLS is its insistence that leadership legitimacy must be earned, not assumed, and argues that leadership is a relational, socially constructed phenomenon rather than a set of inherent traits (Collinson, 2018). In other words, occupying a formal leadership role does not inherently confer moral or strategic authority. Legitimacy arises through action, accountability, and alignment with institutional values. Invisible leaders often demonstrate this legitimacy through their day-to-day practices, whether by supporting colleagues, championing students, or advancing the institution’s public mission. Their work, though often unsanctioned, is grounded in care, competence, and credibility. By contrast, formal leaders who abstain from engagement—who delay decisions, ignore innovation, or resist collaboration—may occupy leadership positions but lack the moral grounding to lead effectively.

Finally, critical leadership studies encourage us to move from critique to transformation. While it is essential to expose the ways in which power operates through leadership discourses and structures, CLS also calls for the development of new models rooted in equity, reflexivity, and shared responsibility. This includes redesigning evaluation systems to recognize informal and relational leadership, creating safe spaces for dissent and experimentation, and ensuring that leadership pathways are accessible to those historically excluded from decision-

making. In short, CLS provides not just a lens for seeing leadership differently, but a roadmap for doing leadership differently.

Critical leadership studies deepen our understanding of invisible leadership by situating it within the broader political and institutional contexts that shape recognition, power, and legitimacy. By interrogating whose leadership counts, whose is dismissed, and why, CLS equips us with the analytical tools needed to reimagine academic leadership as a more inclusive, dynamic, and justice-oriented endeavor.

Where Invisible Leadership Emerges

Between stated institutional values and lived administrative practice—is precisely where invisible leadership emerges. It is also where it is most vulnerable. Without transparency, consistency, or genuine support, the faculty who drive grassroots innovation are often forced to navigate protectionist cultures alone. The result is a misalignment that not only undermines faculty morale and innovation but ultimately limits the institution's ability to fulfill its own mission.

6. Implications for Practice

The insights presented in this article offer several practical implications for institutional leaders, faculty, and higher education policymakers:

1) Redefine Leadership Beyond Titles

Institutions should broaden their definitions of leadership to include informal, initiative-based contributions. Evaluation systems and recognition processes must be updated to acknowledge faculty and staff who demonstrate vision, collaboration, and impact—regardless of official position.

2) Empower Mid-Level and Frontline Innovators

Department chairs, faculty coordinators, and staff often operate as *de facto* leaders in curriculum design, community engagement, and student success initiatives. Institutions should provide these individuals with resources, autonomy, and structured opportunities for advancement.

3) Create Structures That Encourage Distributed Leadership

Shared governance must be more than symbolic. Institutions should embed distributed leadership principles into strategic planning, committee design, and decision-making protocols—ensuring that those closest to the work have a voice in shaping it.

4) Address Gatekeeping and Bureaucratic Obstruction

Leaders must critically assess whether institutional policies are enabling or stifling progress. Simplifying approval pathways, increasing transparency, and holding gatekeepers accountable are key steps toward a culture of responsiveness and innovation.

5) Align Rhetoric with Action

When senior leaders call for innovation, enrollment growth, or global partnerships, they must be prepared to support the faculty and staff advancing these goals. Budget allocations, policy revisions, and public recognition should reflect a genuine commitment to enabling grassroots leadership.

By implementing these practices, universities can close the gap between leadership rhetoric and institutional reality—empowering those who are already leading from below and creating a more inclusive, agile, and mission-driven academic culture.

7. Conclusion

Invisible leadership is not a theoretical abstraction—it is the quiet force sustaining innovation, equity, and student success within institutions that too often fail to recognize it. In an era when universities face existential pressures—declining enrollment, budget cuts, and growing demands for accountability—the capacity to lead must no longer be confined to titles and administrative structures. Faculty, staff, and mid-level professionals are not simply implementers of institutional strategy; they are its architects, problem-solvers, and moral compass.

This article has shown that while distributed leadership enables innovation, organizational change theory reveals the barriers that stall it, and critical leadership studies uncover the power dynamics that render it invisible. Together, these frameworks point to a central truth: the most impactful leadership in higher education today is often informal, unacknowledged, and unsupported. And yet, it endures—because those who lead from below are driven not by ego or authority, but by purpose, responsibility, and belief in the university’s mission.

If higher education is to thrive, it must shift from rewarding performative leadership to empowering purposeful leadership—where initiative is met with support, not suspicion. This means reevaluating how leadership is defined, recognized, and rewarded. It means holding formal leaders accountable not only for what they say, but for what they do—or fail to do. And it means uplifting those whose leadership is grounded in action, care, and the courage to create.

Invisible leadership should not remain invisible. It is time for universities to align their rhetoric with their structures, their vision with their decisions, and their policies with their people. The future of academia depends not just on who leads, but on whether institutions are willing to see—and support—those who already are.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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