

# Developing authentic leadership through strengths-based coaching: a pedagogical approach for women in higher education

Journal of  
Leadership  
Education

Haley N. Rosson

*Department of Agriculture and Extension Education, New Mexico State University,  
Las Cruces, New Mexico, USA*

Cheyenne Luzynski

*Leadership Studies Program, West Virginia University,  
Morgantown, West Virginia, USA, and*

Julie A. Lockman

*Department of Physiology, Pharmacology, and Toxicology,  
School of Medicine, West Virginia University, Morgantown, West Virginia, USA*

Received 1 April 2026

Revised 24 April 2026

24 June 2026

Accepted 14 July 2026

## Abstract

**Purpose** – Women’s persistent underrepresentation in senior leadership, holding fewer than one-quarter of positions in higher education, points to the need for pedagogical approaches addressing identity, power and systemic barriers, rather than skills alone. This paper examines how integrating strengths-based coaching with authentic leadership theory and explicit power analysis creates developmental pathways for women leaders.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The pedagogical model integrates authentic leadership theory, DeFrank-Cole and Tan’s Four Domains framework and Desimone’s professional learning principles. Implementation occurs through a longitudinal strengths-based leadership coaching program combining peer-coaching pods, integrated curriculum and narrative identity exercises. Proposed mechanisms and outcomes are derived from semi-structured interviews with seven program completers and sustained implementation across nearly 70 participants in multiple cohorts.

**Findings** – Three interconnected pedagogical mechanisms supported women’s authentic leadership development. Structured strengths awareness helps women reinterpret personal talents as legitimate leadership assets. Narrative identity exercises enable articulation of authentic leadership philosophy. Facilitated power conversations shift participants from hierarchical (“power over”) to relational (“power with”) orientations. Women reported increased confidence, stronger identification as leaders and resistance to gendered leadership expectations.

**Practical implications** – Leadership educators can adapt five design elements: longitudinal structure, small peer-coaching pods, integrated curriculum linking strengths to identity and power, narrative exercises and facilitator modeling of collaborative leadership.

**Originality/value** – Unlike skill-focused professional development, this model demonstrates how integrating strengths-based practice, identity work and power reframing addresses interconnected barriers women face. The pedagogical framework offers educators a theoretically grounded, empirically tested approach to fostering equitable leadership cultures that transfers beyond specific program contexts.

**Keywords** Women’s leadership development, Authentic leadership, Leadership identity, Strengths-based coaching, Higher education, Leadership pedagogy

**Paper type** Practitioner paper

## Introduction

Women remain underrepresented in higher education leadership, holding only 24% of senior roles at U.S. research universities (Silbert & Dube, 2021). Systemic barriers, gender

© Haley N. Rosson, Cheyenne Luzynski and Julie A. Lockman. Published in *Journal of Leadership Education*. This article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) licence. Anyone may reproduce, distribute, translate and create derivative works of this article (for both commercial and non-commercial purposes), subject to full attribution to the original publication and authors. The full terms of this licence may be seen at <http://creativecommons.org/licences/by/4.0/>



Journal of Leadership Education  
Emerald Publishing Limited  
1552-9045  
DOI 10.1108/JOLE-04-2026-0053

stereotypes and cultural norms constrain advancement across individual, interpersonal, organizational and societal levels – —often becoming internalized and shaping women’s self-concept and confidence as leaders (Carli & Eagly, 2016; DeFrank-Cole & Tan, 2021). Leadership development programs have emerged as critical interventions to address these barriers. When designed specifically for women, such programs not only build leadership skills but also validate women’s leadership capacity and disrupt gendered stereotypes (Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011; Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023).

However, less is known about the specific pedagogical mechanisms through which sustained, strengths-based programs support women’s authentic leadership development. This paper addresses that gap by examining the application of a novel integrated pedagogical model implemented through a two-year strengths-based leadership coaching program and translating outcomes into a replicable curricular model for leadership educators.

## **Background and literature review**

### *Power and gender in leadership education*

Power is foundational to leadership, described as the capacity to influence others through positional authority or personal credibility (French & Raven, 1959). However, power enactment and perception are highly gendered. Social role theory and role congruency theory explain how cultural expectations position men as agentic leaders and women as communal, creating bias when women’s leadership behaviors deviate from these norms (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Karau, 2002). Women who display assertiveness often face backlash (Bowles, Babcock, & Lai, 2007), contributing to persistent underrepresentation in leadership (Hoobler, Lemmon, & Wayne, 2014). Women frequently enact power differently, favoring democratic and collaborative approaches (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Helgesen, 1995; Kray & Kennedy, 2017). While such approaches align with communal expectations, they can constrain women’s authentic leadership expression. Leadership educators have increasingly called for programs that move beyond individual skill acquisition to address systemic and identity-based dynamics (Dugan, 2024). Reconceptualizing power as empowerment of self and others – rather than control over others – is central to women’s leadership development and informs the pedagogical approach presented here.

### *Authentic leadership as pedagogical foundation*

Authentic Leadership emphasizes self-awareness, relational transparency and alignment of values and actions (Avolio, Luthans, & Walumbwa, 2004; Gardner, Cogliser, Davis, & Dickens, 2011). Authentic leaders “know who they are, what they believe and value, and act upon those values” (Luthans & Avolio, 2003, p. 243). For women leaders, authenticity enables resistance to role expectations and stereotypes that constrain leadership expression, while fostering trust, collaboration and positive organizational cultures (Northouse, 2019). Authentic leadership aligns well with strengths-based practices, in which leaders intentionally leverage their talents to enhance self-awareness and relational credibility (Ilies, Morgeson, & Nahrgang, 2005; Shamir & Eilam, 2005). This alignment provides a pedagogical bridge between addressing gendered power dynamics and developing positive, strengths-informed leader identities, the foundation of this model.

### *Leader identity development*

Leader identity refers to how individuals see themselves in leadership roles and how others perceive them (Lord, Foti, & de Vader, 1984). Because implicit leadership theories often equate leadership with male prototypes – the “think leader, think male” association (Schein, 1973) – women can struggle to see themselves as leaders or be recognized as such (Gardner et al., 2011). Leadership development programs that encourage reflection on gender, identity and power create opportunities for women to reconstruct their leadership identity in ways that

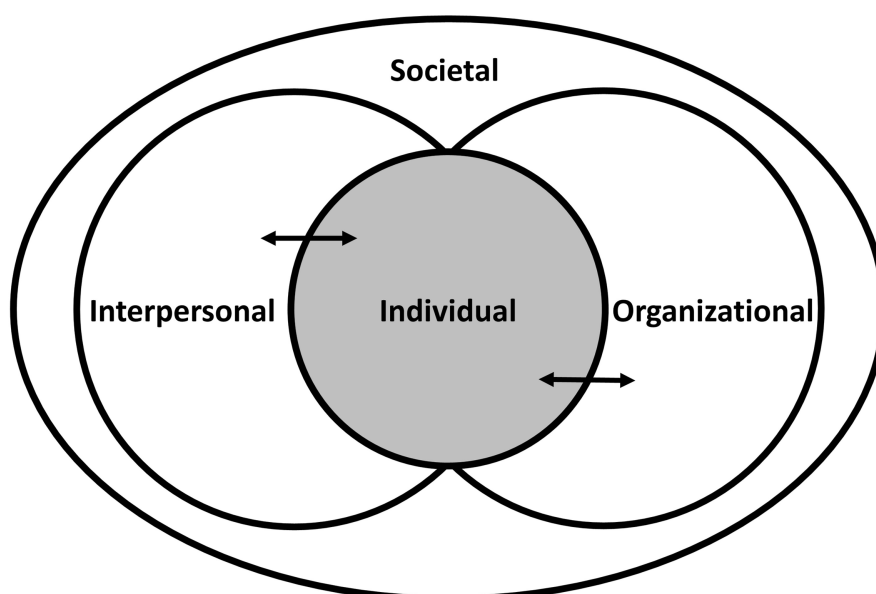
are congruent with their authentic selves (Du Billing & Alvesson, 2014). Such identity work strengthens confidence and provides a foundation for the intentional application of strengths, a core pedagogical objective of this model.

### *Strengths-based leadership and organizations*

Strengths-based leadership, rooted in positive organizational psychology, emphasizes identifying and intentionally applying natural talents (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001; Clifton & Harter, 2003). Research consistently demonstrates that using strengths enhances performance, engagement, goal attainment and well-being (Govindji & Linley, 2007; Harzer & Ruch, 2012; Linley, Nielsen, Wood, Gillett, & Biswas-Diener, 2010). Strengths use also contributes to authenticity, resilience and positive relational outcomes (Elston & Boniwell, 2011; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). Leadership interventions that extend beyond strengths identification to include practice, feedback and reflection are most effective (Lopez & Louis, 2009; Louis, 2011). Strengths-based coaching has been shown to foster transformational leadership skills and sustained professional growth (MacKie, 2014). For women leaders, such approaches provide concrete tools to align identity and authenticity with daily leadership practice, particularly when paired with supportive communities that encourage reflection and application.

### **Theoretical framework**

This work draws upon DeFrank-Cole and Tan's (2021) Four Domains of Leadership and Gender as the primary framework. As Figure 1 illustrates, the model identifies barriers and supports women encounter across four interconnected levels: the Personal domain (individual confidence and identity, including impostor syndrome), the Interpersonal domain (relational



© 2020 Sherylle J. Tan and Lisa DeFrank-Cole

**Figure 1.** DeFrank-Cole and Tan's (2021) four domains of leadership and gender. Source: "Women and Leadership: Journey Toward Equity," by DeFrank-Cole and Tan (2021), p. 13, Sage Publications, Inc

dynamics, mentorship and peer support), the Organizational domain (institutional policies, advancement structures and workplace cultures) and the Societal domain (cultural norms, gender stereotypes and systemic expectations). By revealing how bias operates simultaneously across these multiple levels, the framework underscores why women's leadership development requires integrated approaches that address individual confidence, relational dynamics, institutional structures and cultural norms together rather than in isolation. Programs that address only one domain leave women navigating the others on their own. Combined through the lens of Authentic Leadership theory, the Four Domains framework guided both the design and examination of pedagogical mechanisms presented in this paper. This integrated framework aligns with [Dugan's \(2024\)](#) call for critical perspectives in leadership theory that emphasize relational, systemic and equity-oriented dimensions – recognizing that effective intervention must disrupt stereotypes while building women's confidence, efficacy and leadership identity across all four domains.

### **Program design and pedagogical rationale**

This pedagogical model supports women's authentic leadership development through an integrated, two-phase approach. Each phase addresses distinct but interconnected developmental needs identified in the Four Domains framework, moving from individual awareness to systemic application.

#### *Phase 1: building strengths awareness foundation*

Phase 1 establishes foundational awareness of strengths through monthly small-group sessions over one academic year. Grounded in [Knowles' \(1984\)](#) andragogical principles and [Desimone's \(2009\)](#) characteristics of professional learning, the curriculum emphasizes relevance, application and supportive learning communities. Participants complete a strengths assessment and engage in structured activities progressing from individual awareness to collaborative application. Small peer-coaching pods (6–8 participants), facilitated by trained coaches, create psychologically safe spaces for vulnerability and experimentation. Pod membership intentionally diversifies career stages, positions and disciplines to maximize cross-functional learning. This foundational year establishes the strengths language, relational trust and self-awareness necessary for deeper identity and power work – addressing the Personal and Interpersonal domains of the Four Domains model.

#### *Phase 2: deepening identity and power work*

Phase 2 extends over an additional academic year with monthly sessions that explicitly connect strengths to leadership identity and power dynamics addressing the Organizational and Societal domains. The curriculum operationalizes three interconnected pedagogical mechanisms through sequenced activities.

First, participants deepen strengths application by exploring how multiple talents interact and map to specific leadership responsibilities (collaboration, management, productivity). This builds on [Avolio and Gardner's \(2005\)](#) concept of self-awareness as the foundation of authentic leadership, moving participants from abstract self-knowledge to intentional practice.

Second, narrative identity exercises help participants articulate their leadership approach in their own words through structured "Strengths Brand" statements. This operationalizes authentic leadership theory by translating internal self-awareness into publicly expressible leadership identity – often marking a turning point in participants' confidence and self-acceptance as leaders.

Third, the curriculum shifts focus from self to others and systems. Participants develop skills in recognizing colleagues' strengths (relational leadership), applying talent profiles to team dynamics (organizational navigation) and integrating strengths with institutional mission (systemic application). This progression reflects [Desimone's \(2009\)](#) principles of

effective professional learning: content focus, active learning, coherence, sustained duration and collective participation.

### Program context and evidence base

The model has been applied across multiple cohorts at a large research university, with nearly 70 women completing the full two-year program. Approximately 35% of Phase 1 participants voluntarily continue into Phase 2 – a notable retention rate given the substantial time commitment and absence of external incentives. To understand how these pedagogical mechanisms operate in practice, we examined participant experiences following program implementation. Seven participants from the inaugural cohort volunteered for semi-structured interviews following program completion, representing diverse career stages and roles (see [Table 1](#)). All participants are identified by pseudonyms. Interviews were approved by the institutional review board (Protocol: 2212688198).

### Pedagogical mechanisms and developmental outcomes

Analysis of participant interviews revealed three interconnected pedagogical mechanisms: (1) translating personal talents into leadership assets, (2) narrative identity construction and (3) power reframing through facilitated dialogue. These mechanisms emerged consistently across the inaugural cohort and have been observed reliably in subsequent cohorts, confirming their robustness and transferability as design principles. [Table 2](#) summarizes the mechanisms, developmental outcomes, curriculum activities and exemplar quotes. Participant voices throughout this paper illustrate how these mechanisms manifest in practice.

#### *Illustrative case: Crystal's leadership development journey*

To illustrate how these three mechanisms work together, we present Crystal's experience as a representative case. Crystal, a mid-career director in community policy, entered the program with substantial professional accomplishments but persistent doubts about her leadership legitimacy. Like many women in higher education, she struggled to reconcile her collaborative, relationship-focused approach with prevailing images of authoritative leadership.

During Phase 2, Crystal engaged in talent mapping by aligning her strengths profile (Learner, Input, Connectedness, Intellection and Arranger) with her primary leadership responsibilities. This reflection helped her see where and how her strengths contributed to her leadership practice (Mechanism 1: translating talents into leadership assets).

The Strengths Brand exercise marked a turning point. Crystal created a personal leadership mission statement by selecting key words and phrases that resonated with her authentic approach. Her final statement is shown in [Figure 2](#), with detailed instructions in [Appendix I](#). Crystal described the impact: “*For the first time in my life, I have the opposite*

**Table 1.** Participant demographics

| Pseudonym | Age range | Career stage | Position type      | Discipline/Sector       |
|-----------|-----------|--------------|--------------------|-------------------------|
| Courtney  | 25–35     | Early        | Doctoral Candidate | Education/Teaching      |
| Alice     | 55–65     | Late         | Tenured Faculty    | Education               |
| Jessica   | 35–45     | Middle       | Director           | Community/Advocacy      |
| Crystal   | 35–45     | Middle       | Director           | Community/Policy        |
| Megan     | 25–35     | Early/Middle | Director           | Academic Administration |
| Cynthia   | 45–55     | Middle       | Tenured Faculty    | Social Science          |
| Danielle  | 25–35     | Early        | Director           | Academic Administration |

**Table 2.** Mechanism, developmental outcomes and exemplar quotes

| Mechanism                                           | Developmental outcomes               | Description                                            | Curriculum activity                     | Exemplar quote                                                                            |
|-----------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Translating Personal Talents into Leadership Assets | Authentic Self & Self-Awareness      | Reflection and confidence in strengths use             | Talent mapping                          | "I wasn't sure I should be utilizing my strengths. . . not the case anymore." (Alice)     |
|                                                     | Collaborative/ Supportive Approaches | Strengths as tools for inclusive teams                 | Talent spotting                         | "Just being upfront that people need different things. . . creates a safe space." (Megan) |
| Narrative Identity Construction                     | Acceptance and Validation            | Reframed leadership capacity, reduced self-doubt       | Strengths Brand Statement               | "For the first time, I have the opposite of impostor syndrome." (Crystal)                 |
|                                                     | Gender Dynamics                      | Challenged traditional (masculine) norms of leadership | Bring and Need                          | "Before strengths, I thought strong men were leaders." (Jessica)                          |
| Power Reframing through Facilitated Dialogue        | Empowering Self and Others           | Strengths supported confidence and credibility         | Session discussions/ Shared experiences | "I feel like I can back up my decisions more confidently." (Alice)                        |
|                                                     | Shared/Distributed Power             | Collective, relational power emphasized                | Strengths activity on persuading others | "Power-with is the kind of power I'm interested in having." (Crystal)                     |

**Note(s):** Participant names are pseudonyms. Quotes are shortened for table presentation; full quotations are presented in the text

*of impostor syndrome. I feel like I know exactly who I am and what I bring to the table... I can articulate it in a way that feels authentic and powerful"* (Mechanism 2: narrative identity construction).

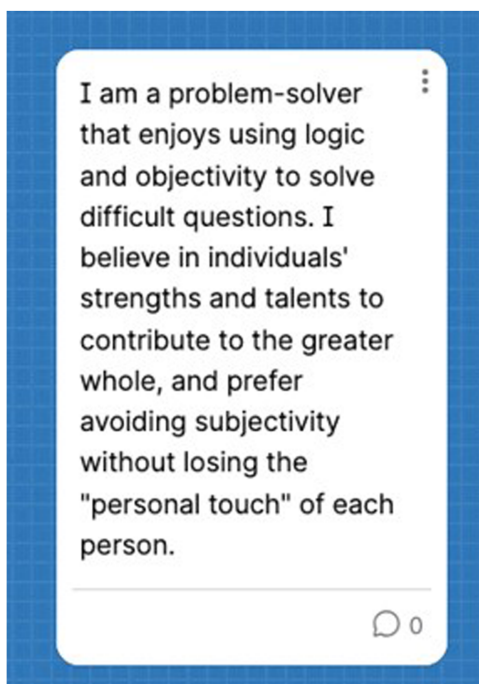
This identity work enabled Crystal to reconceptualize power and influence. She explained: *"Power-with is the kind of power I'm interested in having. Not power over people, but power to make things happen together"* (Mechanism 3: power reframing through facilitated dialogue). Crystal's journey demonstrates the developmental arc that the integrated curriculum supports: awareness of strengths enables identity articulation, which in turn enables more authentic and strategic approaches to power and influence. Her experience is representative of patterns observed across participants and cohorts.

We now examine each of the three mechanisms in detail, explaining their theoretical grounding, pedagogical implementation and developmental outcomes.

*Mechanism 1: translating personal talents into leadership assets*

*Pedagogical design element.* The curriculum begins with structured activities that help participants reinterpret natural talents as leadership assets rather than personal quirks. Talent mapping asks participants to align their strengths profile with specific leadership responsibilities: collaboration, management, productivity, relationship-building and influence. This exercise moves beyond abstract self-knowledge to concrete application.

*Theoretical grounding.* This mechanism operationalizes the emphasis in authentic leadership theory on self-awareness as the foundation for authentic practice (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). By providing a structured framework for understanding how talents manifest in professional contexts, participants develop "self-knowledge and self-concept clarity" (Gardner et al., 2011), essential precursors to authentic leadership behavior.



**Figure 2.** Crystal's strengths brand statement

*How it manifests.* Participants described a cognitive shift from viewing some of their personal characteristics as weaknesses to recognizing them as legitimate leadership tools. Alice, a late-career faculty member, explained: “I wasn’t sure I should be utilizing my strengths in certain spaces, but that’s not the case anymore. Now I’m very deliberate about it.” This reinterpretation often challenged prior assumptions about effective leadership. Jessica noted, “Before strengths, I thought just strong men were considered leaders. Now I see leadership differently – it’s about knowing yourself and using what you naturally do well.”

*What educators should expect.* Leadership educators should anticipate that participants will initially struggle to see certain natural talents as “leadership qualities,” particularly if those talents deviate from traditional masculine stereotypes. The structured mapping provides the necessary scaffolding to make these connections explicit. Facilitators should create space for participants to voice skepticism, as working through these doubts is part of the reinterpretation process.

### *Mechanism 2: narrative identity construction*

*Pedagogical design element.* Narrative identity construction through the Strengths Brand Statement exercise empowers participants to articulate their leadership approach in their own words. Unlike traditional development that imposes external competency frameworks, this exercise centers on authentic self-expression. The process involves highlighting resonant language, drafting “I am/I will/I bring/I need” statements and refining them through peer feedback.

*Theoretical grounding.* This mechanism addresses a critical challenge in leader identity development: translating internal self-concept into publicly expressible identity (Lord & Hall, 2005). For women, this is compounded by implicit theories equating leadership with masculine traits (Schein, 1973). By grounding identity in actual strengths rather than idealized prototypes, the exercise enables women to claim leadership on their own terms.

*How it manifests.* Participants described the Strengths Brand exercise as transformative. Crystal’s experience captures the shift from impostor syndrome to confident self-articulation: “For the first time in my life, I have the opposite of impostor syndrome. I feel like I know exactly who I am and what I bring to the table.” The exercise also helped participants challenge gendered expectations. Jessica explained: “I realized I don’t have to lead like a man to be taken seriously. My strengths are different, and that’s actually my advantage.”

*What educators should expect.* This exercise often marks a turning point in confidence. However, facilitators should expect initial resistance to “self-promotion,” particularly from women socialized to downplay their capabilities. Normalizing this discomfort is essential. Educators must allow ample time for drafting and peer validation; rushing this process undermines the identity consolidation required for self-authorization.

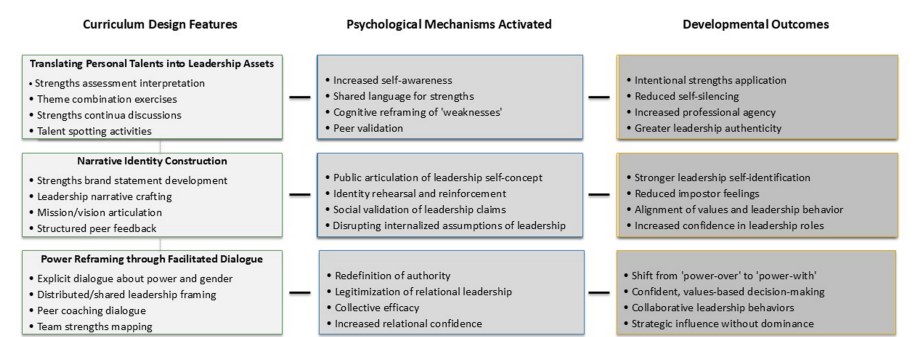
*Mechanism 3: power reframing through facilitated dialogue*  
*Pedagogical design element.* Facilitators explicitly address power dynamics and gendered expectations through structured discussions. Rather than avoiding the “elephant in the room,” the curriculum creates space for participants to examine how power operates in their contexts and how their strengths enable alternative approaches to influence.

*Theoretical grounding.* This mechanism addresses the Organizational and Societal domains of DeFrank-Cole and Tan’s (2021) framework. By making power explicit and reframing it as “power-with” rather than “power-over” (Helgesen, 1995), the curriculum legitimizes collaborative approaches that align with many women’s strengths while expanding traditional leadership paradigms.

*How it manifests.* Participants consistently reconceptualized power and influence. Crystal articulated this shift clearly: “Power-with is the kind of power I’m interested in having. Not power over people, but power to make things happen together.” Strengths awareness also enhanced personal credibility. Alice explained, “I feel like I can back up my decisions more confidently now. I know why I’m approaching things the way I am, and I can explain it.”

*What educators should expect.* This mechanism requires skilled facilitation to ensure conversations about gendered barriers remain forward-looking and solution-oriented. The small peer coaching pod structure is essential here; participants are more willing to be vulnerable about power struggles in intimate settings. Educators should be prepared for diverse relationships with power across career stages.

*Integration: how the mechanisms work together*  
These three mechanisms are interconnected and mutually reinforcing (see Figure 3). Strengths awareness (Mechanism 1) provides the foundation; participants cannot construct authentic



**Figure 3.** Pedagogical mechanisms linking curriculum design to leadership development outcomes. This model illustrates how three interconnected mechanisms – translating personal talents into leadership assets, narrative identity construction and power reframing through facilitated dialogue – connect specific curriculum activities to developmental outcomes that support women’s authentic leadership development

leadership identities (Mechanism 2) without first understanding their actual talents. Identity articulation, in turn, enables more strategic power navigation (Mechanism 3) – women who can name their leadership approach can advocate for it more effectively.

The pedagogical design intentionally sequences these mechanisms. Phase 1 establishes strengths awareness and relational trust. Phase 2 deepens identity work and power analysis once participants have internalized strengths language and built peer support. This progression reflects authentic leadership theory's emphasis on self-awareness as the foundation for relational transparency and balanced processing.

Crystal's journey illustrates this integration: talent mapping helped her understand her approach, the Strengths Brand exercise gave her language to articulate it and facilitated dialogue helped her apply this self-knowledge to navigate organizational dynamics strategically.

### **Transferable design framework**

This pedagogical model rests on five core design principles that leadership educators can adapt to diverse institutional contexts. Below, we outline each principle with implementation guidance and considerations for adaptation.

#### *Longitudinal structure (minimum one academic year)*

The two-year structure allows developmental depth that single-semester programs cannot achieve. Participants need time to internalize strengths awareness, experiment with application and refine their leadership identity. The 35% retention rate from Phase 1 to Phase 2 suggests that participants recognize the value of this extended engagement.

*Implementation guidance:* At a minimum, programs should span one full academic year with monthly sessions to establish rhythm and allow for real-world application. Practitioners should build in "application windows" – explicitly assigning participants to try specific strengths-based approaches in their work contexts and return to debrief.

*Action step:* When designing your timeline, map backward from your end date to ensure at least 8 months of active programming with monthly touchpoints.

*Adaptations:* Programs can be condensed to one year by integrating Phase 1 and Phase 2 content, though this may sacrifice developmental depth. Educators working within the constraints of a single semester should prioritize strict developmental sequencing as outlined in Integrated Curriculum (3, below).

#### *Small peer coaching pods (6–8 participants)*

Consistent small groups, facilitated by trained coaches, create psychological safety essential for vulnerable identity work. Participants emphasized that peer affirmation and shared dialogue were critical for translating awareness into confidence. The relational container proved as important as the curricular content.

*Implementation guidance:* Assign participants to consistent small groups that meet throughout the program. Practitioners should intentionally compose pods to balance diversity in career stage and discipline with enough commonality to ensure shared context.

*Action step:* Create a simple matrix of participants' roles and units. Distribute these characteristics across pods to maximize cross-functional learning, while avoiding placing supervisors and direct reports in the same pod to protect psychological safety.

*Adaptations:* Programs serving fewer than 10 participants can maintain a single cohort. Virtual programs can use breakout rooms to maintain pod intimacy while benefiting from platform flexibility. Cross-institutional collaborations might create pods spanning multiple campuses, though this requires intentional trust-building across institutional boundaries.

*Integrated curriculum: strengths → identity → power*

Rather than treating strengths as an isolated assessment, the curriculum connects talent identification to leadership identity construction and power dynamics. Participants need to recognize their talents before they can construct leadership narratives, and they need coherent identities before they can confidently claim relational power.

*Implementation guidance:* Resist the temptation to front-load discussions of power and gender. Practitioners should begin with individual strengths work to build a “psychological buffer” of confidence before asking participants to analyze systemic barriers.

*Action step:* Structure the curriculum in three phases: (1) Early sessions focus exclusively on strengths awareness; (2) Middle sessions introduce identity articulation; (3) Later sessions explicitly address power dynamics. If participants raise power concerns early, acknowledge them, but redirect to the strengths foundation as the necessary tool for later strategic navigation.

*Adaptations:* Educators working with participants who have experienced significant marginalization may need to acknowledge power dynamics earlier while still maintaining sequencing. The principle remains: build identity strength before deconstructing systemic barriers. Programs that address leadership broadly can adapt power discussions to focus on organizational politics or on influence without formal authority.

*Narrative identity exercises (e.g. strengths brand)*

The Strengths Brand exercise transforms personal self-knowledge into an expressed leadership philosophy. These exercises function as identity-consolidation tools, requiring participants to synthesize insights and communicate them coherently. The public dimension, sharing with peers, creates accountability and marks a developmental milestone from self-awareness to self-authorization.

*Implementation guidance:* Allocate at least two sessions to this exercise – one for introduction and drafting, and one for peer feedback.

*Action step:* In the first session, model the process yourself by sharing your own draft statement to reduce anxiety. Give participants 20–30 minutes of silent drafting time during the session to prevent overthinking. In the second session, use a structured peer feedback protocol where listeners reflect back what they heard as the person’s core leadership identity.

*Adaptations:* Alternative narrative exercises can achieve similar outcomes, such as leadership manifestos or visual concept maps. Digital platforms enable creative formats such as video statements and infographics. Programs without access to proprietary assessments can use free tools (e.g. VIA Character Strengths) or facilitate self-identified strengths through structured reflection.

*Skilled facilitation with explicit attention to gender and power*

Facilitators modeled relational leadership throughout the program. By demonstrating “power with” approaches to dialogue, they reinforced curricular messages about relational influence. Facilitator modeling of vulnerability and collaborative problem-solving created the conditions for participants’ own experimentation.

*Implementation guidance:* Facilitators should have expertise or training in both leadership development and organizational dynamics.

*Action step:* Before launching, facilitators should complete three preparatory activities: (1) engage in their own strengths-based identity work; (2) read foundational literature on women’s leadership barriers to ground discussions in research and (3) practice facilitating difficult conversations about power with a colleague. When participants share experiences of bias, use a three-part response: validate the experience, connect it to systemic patterns and pivot to how their strengths can help them navigate it.

*Adaptations:* Programs without professional coaches can train internal facilitators using the preparatory activities above. Co-facilitation by two women leaders provides complementary

---

perspectives. Consider assigning clear roles (e.g. one facilitates, one captures themes) to avoid confusion. Virtual facilitation requires additional practice in managing breakout rooms and reading energy through screens.

## Discussion

This pedagogical model demonstrates how strengths-based coaching supports women's authentic leadership development. The three mechanisms, translating personal talents to leadership assets, constructing narrative leadership identity and reframing power, offer a replicable framework for addressing the underrepresentation of women in leadership. These mechanisms work synergistically: awareness of strengths provides the foundation for identity articulation, which enables more strategic and authentic approaches to power.

### *Theoretical and pedagogical contributions*

This approach advances leadership education scholarship by demonstrating how strengths-based coaching operationalizes authentic leadership development. Three primary contributions emerge.

First, the model extends strengths-based theory by positioning strengths as building blocks for identity construction rather than merely individual talents. Previous research on strengths has focused primarily on performance outcomes, demonstrating that people who use their strengths are more engaged, productive and satisfied (Clifton & Harter, 2003). This model reveals a different mechanism: strengths function as identity anchors that enable women to construct leadership self-concepts resistant to external stereotypes. This distinction matters for leadership education. If strengths merely improve performance, then any leadership development approach could incorporate them as a supplementary tool. But if strengths serve as the foundations of identity, providing language, legitimacy and psychological grounding for claiming leadership, then they become essential for populations whose leadership capacity is systematically questioned. For women navigating "think leader-think male" biases (Schein, 1973), strengths offer an alternative basis for authority: "I lead this way not because I'm imitating masculine norms, but because these are my actual talents." This reframing proved liberating for participants who had spent careers trying to fit external templates.

Leadership educators should recognize that the developmental mechanism here is not strengths awareness per se, but the cognitive reframing that structured reflection enables. The talent mapping exercise, asking participants to connect specific strengths to specific leadership responsibilities, transformed abstract self-knowledge into concrete leadership legitimacy. This suggests that strengths assessments alone are insufficient; the pedagogical work lies in facilitating the translation from "this is who I am" to "this is why (and how) I belong in leadership."

Second, this work reframes authentic leadership as a social process. Growth occurred through social interaction, peer dialogue and coaching, rather than individual reflection alone. This challenges leadership education approaches that rely primarily on self-assessment and individual development plans. Authentic leadership requires relational contexts where women can evaluate, articulate and refine their leadership self-concepts through interaction.

Third, the model demonstrates how explicit power reframing disrupts gendered barriers. By shifting from "power over" to "power with," women can claim authority without conforming to masculine prototypes. Effective women's leadership education must address the Personal and Interpersonal domains while acknowledging the structural constraints of the Organizational and Societal domains.

Fourth, this model provides a concrete example of how to operationalize DeFrank-Cole and Tan's (2021) Four Domains framework in leadership education practice. While the framework identifies Personal, Interpersonal, Organizational and Societal barriers women face, it does not

prescribe specific pedagogical interventions. This model demonstrates how curriculum can address multiple domains simultaneously: strengths awareness targets the Personal domain (self-concept), narrative identity work addresses the Interpersonal domain (how women present themselves to others) and power reframing tackles both Organizational (navigating hierarchies) and Societal (challenging gendered norms) domains.

Critically, the model shows that effective women's leadership education cannot address domains in isolation. Participants needed Personal domain work (strengths awareness) before they could effectively navigate Interpersonal challenges (articulating their approach). They needed both before they could strategically address Organizational and Societal barriers. This sequencing matters: programs that begin with structural critique without first building identity strength risk reinforcing deficit narratives. By contrast, programs that focus only on individual development without acknowledging systemic barriers leave women unprepared for the gendered dynamics they will encounter.

For leadership educators, this integration offers a roadmap: begin with identity-affirming work that builds psychological resources, then progressively introduce structural analysis once participants have the confidence and language to navigate those realities strategically. This developmental progression distinguishes transformative leadership education from either purely individual skill-building or purely critical consciousness-raising.

### **Implications for leadership educators**

This model offers several actionable implications for leadership educators designing women's development programs or adapting existing curricula. First, resist the temptation to "fix" women. Traditional leadership development often positions women as deficient, lacking confidence, negotiation skills or executive presence. This model demonstrates an alternative: begin with what women already possess (their strengths) and build from there. Participants reported that this strengths-first approach felt affirming rather than remedial, creating psychological safety for deeper developmental work. Educators should audit their curricula for deficit framing and reorient toward asset-based approaches.

Second, create structured opportunities for identity articulation, not just skill-building. Leadership development often emphasizes competencies – strategic thinking, communication, and decision-making, without attending to identity. But for women, the barrier is often not capability but authorization: "Do I belong here? Can I lead as myself?" Narrative exercises like the Strengths Brand provide the scaffolding for women to answer these questions affirmatively. Educators should allocate considerable time to identity work, recognizing it as foundational rather than supplementary.

Third, make power explicit. Many leadership programs avoid discussing power, treating it as unseemly or divisive. But women navigate gendered power dynamics daily; ignoring this reality leaves them to figure it out alone. Facilitated dialogue about power types, influence strategies and gendered expectations normalizes these conversations and equips women with language and frameworks. Educators should position power literacy as a core leadership competency, not an optional "diversity topic."

Finally, prioritize peer learning over expert instruction. The small pod structure proved as important as curricular content. Participants valued hearing how other women navigated similar challenges, recognizing their experiences in others' stories, and receiving validation from peers. Educators should design programs that maximize peer interaction, recognizing that women's leadership development is fundamentally relational.

### *Program sustainability and scalability*

The model's effectiveness is evidenced by its sustained implementation across nearly 70 participants. A 35% voluntary retention rate from Phase 1 to Phase 2 – despite the substantial time commitment and absence of external incentives – suggests that the longitudinal structure

addresses developmental needs that shorter interventions do not satisfy. The consistency of outcomes across multiple cohorts confirms that these pedagogical mechanisms are robust design principles rather than artifacts of a single group's dynamics.

### *Contextual considerations and adaptations*

While this pedagogical model has demonstrated effectiveness across multiple cohorts, leadership educators should consider several contextual factors when adapting it to their specific settings.

*Institutional context and population.* This model was developed and evaluated at a large research university serving primarily white women in higher education. Leadership educators implementing this approach in different institutional types – community colleges, liberal arts colleges or non-academic organizations – should consider how local culture shapes leadership expectations and power dynamics. For example, community colleges with flatter hierarchies may require less emphasis on navigating formal organizational power structures, while corporate settings may require more explicit attention to competitive dynamics that academic cultures often downplay.

The model's focus on women's leadership development addresses gender-specific barriers, but the core mechanisms – translating talents to assets, constructing narrative identity, reframing power – apply across identities. Educators serving women of color, LGBTQ+ women or women with disabilities must explicitly integrate intersectionality frameworks to ensure power conversations address multiple forms of marginalization. The Four Domains framework can be expanded to incorporate intersectional analysis, examining how race, class, sexuality and other identities interact with gender to shape leadership experiences. Programs serving men or gender-diverse populations can adapt power-reframing discussions to address different dynamics while maintaining the developmental sequence from strengths awareness to identity construction to power navigation.

*Assessment tools and resources.* This implementation used CliftonStrengths<sup>®</sup>, a proprietary assessment requiring per-participant fees. Leadership educators without assessment budgets can substitute free alternatives (VIA Character Strengths, Reflected Best Self Exercise) or facilitate the identification of self-identified strengths through structured reflection. The pedagogical mechanisms depend on having a shared language for discussing talents, not on any specific assessment tool. What matters is providing participants with a framework that helps them name what they naturally do well and connect those talents to leadership capacity.

Similarly, while this model benefited from trained coaches with strengths-based expertise, organizations can develop internal facilitators using the preparatory activities outlined in the Transferable Design Framework. The facilitator guide ([Appendix I](#)) provides a structure that reduces the expertise barrier for implementation of one of the most critical exercises, the Strengths Brand Statement.

*Evidence base and generalizability.* The detailed participant narratives presented here draw from seven women in the inaugural cohort, providing a rich illustration of how the pedagogical mechanisms manifest in practice. The consistency of these mechanisms across participants in subsequent cohorts suggests their robustness as design principles. However, leadership educators should document their own implementations to build the evidence base across diverse contexts. Variations in participant outcomes based on institutional type, participant demographics or program adaptations would contribute valuable knowledge to the field.

The voluntary nature of Phase 2 participation means that the experiences presented here reflect those of women who chose to engage further. Leadership educators should consider how to serve participants who complete only Phase 1 or who need different developmental pathways. Some women may benefit more from skill-focused training than identity work; others may need identity development before they're ready for strengths-based approaches. The model presented here is one pedagogical pathway, not a universal solution.

*Timeframe and commitment.* The two-year longitudinal structure creates developmental depth but requires substantial commitment from both participants and institutions. Leadership educators working within tighter constraints can condense the model to one year (see adaptations of the Transferable Design Framework), though this may limit identity transformation. Organizations should be realistic about what shorter timeframes can achieve: awareness and skill-building are feasible in one semester; identity reconstruction and power reframing require extended engagement.

The monthly session frequency balances sustained engagement with practical scheduling constraints. More frequent sessions (biweekly) might accelerate development but risk overwhelming participants; less frequent sessions (quarterly) may lose momentum. Leadership educators should consider their participants' workload reality when determining session frequency and duration.

#### *Directions for continued development*

Future development should include longitudinal tracking of participants' career trajectories to clarify long-term impact on leadership advancement. Explicit attention to intersectionality is essential for serving diverse populations and ensuring the model addresses systemic barriers. Leadership educators are encouraged to document their experiences and share adaptations across different sectors to advance the scholarship of leadership education practice.

### **Conclusion**

Women's leadership development demands attention to identity, power and systemic barriers. This pedagogical model demonstrates how strengths-based coaching, structured identity work and explicit power analysis can be integrated into a coherent framework. By grounding leadership identity in participants' actual strengths rather than external prototypes, this approach enables women to claim leadership on their own terms while navigating gendered organizational dynamics. This model provides a theoretically grounded and practically adaptable approach to building equitable leadership pipelines in higher education and beyond.

### **AI contribution disclaimer**

ChatGPT v3.5 was used as a tertiary triangulation tool to identify patterns in coded interview data. Claude 4.5 Sonnet (Anthropic) was used to assist with manuscript editing, including grammar checking, sentence clarity and formatting consistency. No AI tools were used for conceptual development, analysis, interpretation or generation of original ideas. All intellectual content, program design, analysis and scholarly contributions are the work of the human authors.

### **Supplementary material**

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

### **References**

- Avolio, B. J., & Gardner, W. L. (2005). Authentic leadership development: Getting to the root of positive forms of leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 16(3), 315–338. doi: [10.1016/j.leaqua.2005.03.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2005.03.001).
- Avolio, B. J., Luthans, F., & Walumbwa, F. O. (2004). Authentic leadership: Theory building for veritable sustained performance. [Working Paper]. University of Nebraska.
- Bowles, H. R., Babcock, L., & Lai, L. (2007). Social incentives for gender differences in the propensity to initiate negotiations: Sometimes it does hurt to ask. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 103(1), 84–103. doi: [10.1016/j.obhdp.2006.09.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2006.09.001).
- Buckingham, M., & Clifton, D. O. (2001). *Now, discover your strengths*. Free Press.

- Carli, L. L., & Eagly, A. H. (2016). Women face a labyrinth: An examination of metaphors for women leaders. *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, 31(8), 514–527. doi: [10.1108/GM-02-2015-0007](https://doi.org/10.1108/GM-02-2015-0007).
- Clifton, D. O., & Harter, J. K. (2003). Strengths investment. In K. S. Cameron, J. E. Dutton, & R. E. Quinn (Eds.), *Positive organizational scholarship* (pp. 111–121). Berrett-Koehler.
- DeFrank-Cole, L., & Tan, S. J. (2021). *Women and leadership: Journey toward equity*. Sage.
- Desimone, L. M. (2009). Improving impact studies of teachers' professional development: Toward better conceptualizations and measures. *Educational Researcher*, 38(3), 181–199. doi: [10.3102/0013189X08331140](https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X08331140).
- Du Billing, Y., & Alvesson, M. (2014). Leadership: A matter of gender? In S. Kumra, R. Simpson, & R. J. Burke (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Gender in Organizations* (pp. 200–222). Oxford University Press. doi: [10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199658213.013.009](https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199658213.013.009).
- Dugan, J. P. (2024). *Leadership theory: Cultivating critical perspectives* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Eagly, A. H. (1987). *Sex differences in social behavior: A social-role interpretation*. Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Eagly, A. H., & Johannesen-Schmidt, M. C. (2001). The leadership styles of women and men. *Journal of Social Issues*, 57(4), 781–797. doi: [10.1111/0022-4537.00241](https://doi.org/10.1111/0022-4537.00241).
- Eagly, A. H., & Karau, S. J. (2002). Role congruity theory of prejudice towards female leaders. *Psychological Review*, 109(3), 573–598. doi: [10.1037/0033-295x.109.3.573](https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295x.109.3.573).
- Elston, F., & Boniwell, I. (2011). A grounded theory study of the value derived by women in financial services through a coaching intervention to help them identify their strengths and practise using them in the workplace. *International Coaching Psychology Review*, 6(1), 16–32. doi: [10.53841/bpsicpr.2011.6.1.16](https://doi.org/10.53841/bpsicpr.2011.6.1.16).
- Ely, R. J., Ibarra, H., & Kolb, D. M. (2011). Taking gender into account: Theory and design for women's leadership development programs. *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, 10(3), 474–493. doi: [10.5465/amle.2010.0046](https://doi.org/10.5465/amle.2010.0046).
- French, J. R. P. Jr., & Raven, B. (1959). The bases of social power. In D. Cartwright (Ed.), *Studies in Social Power* (pp. 150–167). University of Michigan.
- Galsanjigmed, E., & Sekiguchi, T. (2023). Challenges women experience in leadership careers: An integrative review. *Merits*, 3(2), 366–389. doi: [10.3390/merits3020021](https://doi.org/10.3390/merits3020021).
- Gardner, W. L., Coglisier, C. C., Davis, K. M., & Dickens, M. P. (2011). Authentic leadership: A review of the literature and research agenda. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 22(6), 1120–1145. doi: [10.1016/j.leaqua.2011.09.007](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2011.09.007).
- Govindji, R., & Linley, P. A. (2007). Strengths use, self-concordance and well-being: Implications for strengths coaching and coaching psychologists. *International Coaching Psychology Review*, 2(2), 143–153. doi: [10.53841/bpsicpr.2007.2.2.143](https://doi.org/10.53841/bpsicpr.2007.2.2.143).
- Harzer, C., & Ruch, W. (2012). When the job is a calling: The role of applying one's signature strengths at work. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 7(5), 362–371. doi: [10.1080/17439760.2012.702784](https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2012.702784).
- Helgesen, S. (1995). *The female advantage: Women's ways of leadership*. Doubleday.
- Hoobler, J. M., Lemmon, G., & Wayne, S. J. (2014). Women's managerial aspirations: An organizational development perspective. *Journal of Management*, 40(3), 703–730. doi: [10.1177/0149206311426911](https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206311426911).
- Ilies, R., Morgeson, F. P., & Nahrgang, J. D. (2005). Authentic leadership and eudaemonic well-being: Understanding leader-follower outcomes. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 16(3), 373–394. doi: [10.1016/j.leaqua.2005.03.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2005.03.002).
- Knowles, M. A. (1984). *Andragogy in action: Applying modern principles of adult learning*. Jossey-Bass.
- Kray, L. J., & Kennedy, J. A. (2017). Changing the narrative: Women as negotiators and leaders. *California Management Review*, 60(1), 70–87. doi: [10.1177/0008125617727744](https://doi.org/10.1177/0008125617727744).

- Linley, P. A., Nielsen, K. M., Wood, A. M., Gillett, R., & Biswas-Diener, R. (2010). Using signature strengths in pursuit of goals: Effects on goal progress, need satisfaction, and well-being, and implications for coaching psychologists. *International Coaching Psychology Review*, 5(1), 6–15. doi: [10.53841/bpsicpr.2010.5.1.6](https://doi.org/10.53841/bpsicpr.2010.5.1.6).
- Lopez, S. J., & Louis, M. C. (2009). The principles of strengths-based education. *Journal of College and Character*, 10(4), M1041. doi: [10.2202/1940-1639.1041](https://doi.org/10.2202/1940-1639.1041).
- Lord, R. G., Foti, R. J., & de Vader, C. L. (1984). A test of leadership categorization theory: Internal structure, information processing, and leadership perceptions. *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*, 34(3), 343–378. doi: [10.1016/0030-5073\(84\)90043-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/0030-5073(84)90043-6).
- Lord, R. G., & Hall, R. J. (2005). Identity, deep structure and the development of leadership skill. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 16(4), 591–615. doi: [10.1016/j.leaqua.2005.06.003](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2005.06.003).
- Louis, M. (2011). Strengths interventions in higher education: The effect of identification versus development approaches on implicit self-theory. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 6(3), 204–215. doi: [10.1080/17439760.2011.570366](https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2011.570366).
- Luthans, F., & Avolio, B. J. (2003). Authentic leadership: A positive developmental approach. In K. S. Cameron, J. E. Dutton, & R. E. Quinn (Eds.), *Positive Organizational Scholarship* (pp. 241–261). Berrett-Koehler.
- MacKie, D. (2014). The effectiveness of strength-based executive coaching in enhancing full range leadership development: A controlled study. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 66(2), 118–137. doi: [10.1037/cpb0000005](https://doi.org/10.1037/cpb0000005).
- Northouse, P. G. (2019). Authentic leadership. In *Leadership: Theory and practice* (8th ed., pp. 195–224). Sage.
- Schein, V. E. (1973). The relationship between sex role stereotypes and requisite management characteristics. *The Journal of Applied Psychology*, 57(2), 95–100. doi: [10.1037/h0037128](https://doi.org/10.1037/h0037128).
- Seligman, M. E. P., Steen, T. A., Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2005). Positive psychology progress: Empirical validation of interventions. *American Psychologist*, 60(5), 410–421. doi: [10.1037/0003-066X.60.5.410](https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.60.5.410).
- Shamir, B., & Eilam, G. (2005). ‘What’s your story?’ A life-stories approach to authentic leadership development. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 16(3), 395–417. doi: [10.1016/j.leaqua.2005.03.005](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2005.03.005).
- Silbert, A., & Dube, C. M. (2021). *The power gap among top earners at America’s elite universities*. Eos Foundation. Available from: <https://www.womenspowergap.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/WPG-Power-Gap-at-Elite-Universities-2021-Study-2.pdf>

**Corresponding author**

Julie A. Lockman can be contacted at: [jmlockman@hsc.wvu.edu](mailto:jmlockman@hsc.wvu.edu)