

Gary Hawkins

Personal Leadership Philosophy

To Shelley, the poets have always been “the unacknowledged legislators of the world,” meaning that their concerns with subtleties like beauty are what really align the culture. But what is it that the poet can draw on as a campus leader? For me, some of the tenets and abilities that guide my poetry also guide my leadership.

systems thinking — Sidney Harman, founder and CEO of Harman Kardon audio, seeks poets as managers. Poets are, according to Harman, “our original systems thinkers. They look at our most complex environments and they reduce the complexity to something they begin to understand.” While Harman never found a willing poet to serve as manager, I can affirm that my leadership aims to place every decision in the context of the overlapping systems of which it is part. This means that I have to work to understand the various and interconnecting layers of classroom, colleague, department, division, College, and profession. I aim to negotiate concerns at any level with big picture needs.

To achieve this I find myself asking a series of concentric questions: what will help this colleague thrive? what’s good for the department? what’s best for the College? And the question that should permeate all of those spheres: what will best aid student learning? By asking these questions I hope to test each concern with equal and broad-based criteria—and avoid exceptionalism. And while I value efficiencies where ever I can find them, thinking in systems means keeping the higher outcomes in focus and letting them guide the best practices.

the sympathetic imagination — For the Romantic poets a sympathetic imagination was that ability to inhabit alternate perspectives. For me, this means that I acknowledge the limits of my personal point of view and then actively seek others’ ideas and advice. Additional viewpoints can come more passively, by remaining connected to my colleagues, listening to what’s on their minds. The sympathetic imagination also means that for all my awareness of the systems of which we are a part, I don’t know exactly where others are coming from (be they colleagues or students) unless I make a point of finding out. So, I listen a lot. This also helps me advocate for those who have good ideas or who may have been overlooked.

In addition, I’m reminded of Keats’ definition of this imagination as the capability of “being in uncertainties.” There are a lot of ambiguities I must reside with as I’m piecing together the bigger picture, and in many cases they persist even after research. I acknowledge that most decisions retain some level of doubt, but I endeavor not to get mired in ambiguity. Even in uncertainties, I think I can still make a thoughtful choice.

process — For any writer, the process is as important as the final product. Through systems and sympathy I try to offer a thorough and transparent process for any work I do. This process should be as an efficient one that values everyone’s time but also one that isn’t rushed. Our goal, however, should be to make decisions and advance our plans. If a choice goes my way, I’m already thinking about the next step; if a choice goes against me, I’m ready to move on.

flexibility — No plan (like no poem) plays out how you think it will. I expect things to change; I’m ready for new difficulties or new insights; I accept how it is rather than how I wanted it to be. But I still keep my eye on my goals, and every day I take stock of where we are and plot new steps to move us forward.

formative feedback — Every writer knows that feedback is key to improvement. Even though I can resist feedback at first, I embrace it and the change that it precipitates. Likewise, I am eager to offer formative feedback to colleagues. I want to share resources and enthusiasms; I want to collectively work through challenges. Because it’s not about any one of us. Our individual performances are humbled by the successes of our students’ learning.