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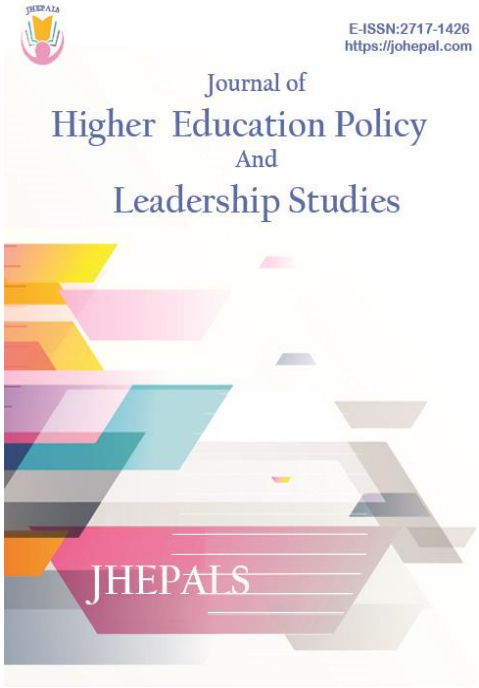


# Considerations for the Future of Leadership Learning: An Interview with Dr. Susan R. Komives

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**Susan R. Komives** *



Susan R. Komives is Professor Emerita in the Student Affairs Graduate Program at the University of Maryland where she taught until her retirement in 2012. She is past president of the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) and of the American College Personnel Association (ACPA). She served as Vice President for Student Development at Stephens College and the University of Tampa and held earlier positions at Denison University and the University of Tennessee. She was a member of the teams that wrote Learning Reconsidered and the ensemble that developed the widely used Social Change Model of Leadership Development. She was a founding co-principal investigator of the international Multi-institutional Study of Leadership and PI for the widely used Leadership Identity Development project. She is co-founder of the National Clearinghouse for Leadership Programs. She has consulted in leadership development or student affairs in Canada, China, Japan, South Korean, Taiwan, and Qatar.

She was honored with the Life-time Legacy Achievement Award in 2022 by the International Leadership Association. She is the 2019 recipient of the NASPA John S. Blackburn Distinguished Pillar of the Profession Award, the 2012 recipient of the ACPA Life-Time Achievement Award, and the 2013 Leadership and Service Award from the Association of Leadership Educators. She is the 2011 recipient of the University of Maryland Board of Regent's Award for Faculty Teaching and the NASPA Shaffer Award for Academic Excellence as a graduate faculty member along with being a NASPA Pillar of the Profession.

https://education.umd.edu/directory/susan-komives

https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=oypcRkEAAAAJ&hl=en

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***Interview***

In this interview with Dr. Susan R. Komives, a pioneer in the collegiate leadership education field, we explore insight into her personal journey, the development of the leadership identity model, and her strong influence in the field.

What were your lived experiences that led you to research leadership development?

I was fortunate to experience positional leadership through high school and college involvement experiences. As I look back on it, those experiences developed agency, raised my understanding about making change, emphasized the importance of purpose, taught me a lot about public speaking, and many, many lessons about working with other people. When I was a new professional, the feminist movement in the late 1960s and 1970s created an empowering era of access to leadership roles in higher education and the joys of working on several amazing teams of colleagues in those rapidly changing times at several large public and well as small private institutions. So both experiences as an individual and as a member of great teams were important.

Throughout those early experiences, gender was always a lens. In my college to professional work transitions, the evolution of women in leadership roles was overdue and morphed through societal messages like women should enact leadership more like men (e.g., talk sports and wear blue suits with bowties) to the more enlightened message to bring our own voices and experiences to those roles as the era progressed. Those amazing teams (often described as Camelot experiences) reinforced that the group is essential in accomplishing change or anything.

After my master's degree and several years' experience, I was acting Director of Residence Halls at the University of Tennessee (9,000 residents) and enrolled in a doctoral program full time when I did my first formal leadership research. My 1973 dissertation was on the effect of the perceived leadership behaviors of vice presidents for student affairs on their department heads' morale and job satisfaction. At that time, exciting new scholarship, like the work of Robert Greenleaf and Hersey and Blanchard's situational leadership theory, challenged older models and brought energy to new ways of viewing leadership through relational lenses. Leadership thinking was moving away from only leader-centered models to include participants (e.g. followers) and the dynamics of the situation. So I was growing to see how context and process mattered.

Digging in into leadership theory and research in doctoral coursework was a terrific foundational grounding. It led me to design leadership workshops for our positional student leaders, facilitate women's leadership workshops such as assertiveness training, and design and co-teach an annual leadership course as a college dean at Denison University in 1974. From that early start, my engagement with any formal position I held (i.e., campus positions such as vice president for student development at Stephens Colleges [a women's college] or

president of the American College Personnel Association) was also an opportunity to study and further advance student leadership as well as focus on staff leadership needs.

## And in 1987 you transitioned to be a full-time graduate faculty member?

Yes, I moved from a vice president of student development position at the University of Tampa to being a graduate faculty member in the student affairs program at the University of Maryland. All dimensions of the leadership field were expanding rapidly. The work of Kouzes and Posner and their leadership challenge five practices, James MacGregor Burns work on transforming leadership, and Peter Vaill or Meg Wheatley's views on anything were exciting. My nascent research agenda included leadership development of professional administrators and of college students often with an exploration of gender. An early study examined gender match in the work pair and transformational leadership using Bernie Bass' Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire. The no significant findings was actually thrilling (and even published in the journal, *Sex Roles*).

## You got something published with no significant findings? Really?

Yes, because showing no difference was important. That multi-institutional study showed both male and female followers viewed either their male or female supervisor (i.e., leader) similarly. This confronted the prevailing assumptions that both men and women preferred working for/with a male leader. Shortly after that, a study using Jean Lipman-Blumen's Achievement Styles Inventory and the MLQ, showed no significant gender differences between achieving styles and transforming leadership practices. But applying a gender lens showed the importance of adding gender to the mix when, for example, a nonsignificant finding on the MSL scale of Intellectual Stimulation was explained because women leaders were significantly positive in this practice while men leaders were significantly negative, and the aggregation of the data masked that explanation.

## Tell us more about your own student leadership development research.

As a new assistant professor, I learned early on that the first good step in a research program is to identify a model or theory, figure out how to apply it, then find a way to examine it. In the early to mid-1990s I had the good fortune to be a member of the ensemble that developed the Social Change Model of Leadership Development (SCM). Funded by an Eisenhower grant, that ensemble included co-PIs Lena and Sandy Astin, Carole Leland, Denny Roberts, Nance Lucas, Tony Chambers, Raechele Pope and several other dear people. That model was designed to address college students and since its launch in 1996 was eagerly and widely adopted through co-curricular leadership programs. My doctoral student, Tracy Tyree, subsequently developed a measure for the model (the Socially Responsible Leadership Scale; SRLS).

***Interview***

In 2005, this led to then PhD student John Dugan and I along with Julie Owen and a team of 17 researchers to design and implement the Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership (MLS; leadershipstudy.net) using the SRLS to measure the SCM along with many other variables and scales such as high school and college involvement, sense of belonging, mentoring, resilience, and leadership self-efficacy. The many useful findings have supported leadership education toward evidence-based practices. With John's leadership, this now international study continues to this day with terrific data from over 500,000 students informing campus leadership education practices. And concurrently there was the LID study.

Yes, tell us about how the Leadership Identity Development Model (LID) came to be and is now 20 years old? How have you seen research on LID be put into practice?

When Nance Lucas, Tim McMahon, and I developed the Relational Leadership Model as a framework for the *Exploring Leadership* book (first published in 1998, now in its 3rd edition and translated into Chinese and Japanese), we knew the research needed was how did students, who evidence the enactment of this model, come to be that way? In 2001, our research team did a grounded theory study that led to the Leadership Identity Development (LID) theory/model with initial publications in 2005 and 2006.

This stage-based model showed the evolution of a person's philosophies of leadership and the important transition from a leader-centric view to that of leadership as a process eventually integrating that with a sense of self. Participants comments like "I can be *A* leader without being *THE* leader" or "I see myself as a facilitator of a process" illustrate the internalization of that leadership identity. [Note: Lindsey Hastings and Hannah Sunderman have just developed an instrument to measure the LID stages]. Learning from Kegan and Lahey's subject/object shift paradigm, we found the terrific qualitative indicator question is to ask, "What did you used to think leadership was and what do you think it is now?" LID is often used as a framework for various qualitative studies and as a way of meaning making in quantitative work.

LID (and other leader identity models) provide a scaffolding to bring more depth to the development of any theoretical leadership model. I used to teach a graduate leadership educator course at Maryland every spring. One of my favorite capstone assignments was for teams to develop a leadership program using LID stages and any leadership theoretical model like the RLM, SCM, five best practices, transforming leadership, servant leadership or the like. [As a side note, there are several issues of the *New Directions for Student leadership* on theoretical models including LID]. This theoretical integration helped operationalize educational practices to see they increased developmental complexity over the LID stages. This led to a rich depth of program design.

Quite a few colleges use this approach in their own leadership programs particularly if they have a multi-year certificate or minor. The integration of LID with a range of leadership theoretical approaches can be well assessed with rubrics like those designed by such scholars as Julie Owen and Wendy Wagner. I should note that we found it really helpful to

overlay the LID stages with those of Chickering's psychosocial developmental vectors (or with Erickson's stages). This also adds depth and richness in program application.

The LID model helped me understand and view leadership as a philosophy. The philosophies that we hold guide what we see and don't see; and shape then what we think is useful, good, or ineffective. They create our mindsets. Philosophies are big tents that can hold a lot of approaches and behaviors but are shaped by a set of values that guide those enactments. I understood myself and leadership better through the LID experience.

Tell us about what influenced your initiatives and involvement in prominent leadership professional organizations and leadership education resources. How did the National Clearinghouse for Leadership Programs, the *New Directions for Student Leadership* series, and the International Leadership Association come about?

Whew! This could be a long answer. I will try to be uncharacteristically brief. My transition to Maryland and the Counseling and Personnel Services grad department was supported by the division of student affairs (Bud Thomas, the VP, in particular). Bud wanted me to be involved with the Maryland co-curricular leadership program and supported my proposal that Maryland establish a National Clearinghouse for Leadership Programs because leadership education needed a home base that could facilitate and be a catalyst for this growing field. Maryland also supported several other clearinghouses to support the student affairs profession. Now keep in mind in these pre-internet days, a clearinghouse was a file cabinet containing reports, articles, and syllabi and a photocopy machine to get the materials requested out to the user (fun fact- that filing cabinet still exists to this day). So, with a new graduate assistant, we launched the NCLP housed in the office of campus life.

Concurrently, the National Association of Campus Activities (Ray Wells, Karen Silian), the Inter-associational Task Force on Leadership Development (Nance Lucas) and the fledgling NCLP (me) co-sponsored an invitational national leadership symposium (NLS) gathering 30 leadership educators to dig into what was needed to organize, advance, and nurture new approaches to student leadership development. Outcomes of several summer symposiums included new definitions of community, a draft of a CAS standard on leadership programs, needs for scholarship situated in the student experience, and coalesced the growing community of leadership educators. The NLS continues to this day, though the name has changed to the Leadership Educators Symposium.

Nance Lucas subsequently came to Maryland and as co-founders of NCLP we got things up and running including a quarterly publication, *Connections*. [note: back issues are available for download at nclp.umd.edu]. Alison Breeze-Mead followed Nance. I primarily then worked as scholarship and research director for NCLP. Later with Craig Slack's leadership we produced such publications as the *Insights & Applications* series (authored by my graduate leadership educator class), *The Handbook for Student Leadership Programs* (two editions, one translated into Chinese), a user site for the SRLS, and the new bi-annual Leadership Educator Institute. NCLP became the repository for the various SCM projects. One of my

graduate classes wrote *Leadership for a Better World: Understanding the Social Change Model of Leadership Development (*two editions edited by me and Wendy Wagner) as a much-needed textbook for the now many leadership courses that used the SCM. The 2nd edition even includes rubrics for each of the seven values of the SCM developed by one of the graduate leadership educator classes. I am particularly proud of initiatives that helped coalesce good people around our shared leadership work and provide a stream of useful materials early in that movement.

I have to say I love my involvement in the International Leadership Association. It was founded at University of Maryland but I was not directly involved in the founding. I have enjoyed being an active member including a term on the Board and serving as a weaver at a conference. It is thrilling to find so many leadership scholars and educators world-wide who share our commitment to leadership development.

### What about the *New Directions for Student Leadership*?

Ah, yes! In the early 2000's publisher Jossey-Bass wanted to focus on student leadership and subsequently published several of our NCLP sponsored books. As I was headed into retirement in 2012, they asked me to serve as a consulting editor so we could bring more leadership education scholarship to the field. One of our ideas was to establish a *New Directions for Student Leadership* series in their already long list of New Directors for [something] titles, but the time wasn't right then for them. So I was thrilled later in retirement to answer my phone and have my editor Erin Null say "Susan, we think we can now do the NDSL concept, would you like to be involved?" and absolutely WOULD I? YES! So, I invited you (Kathy Guthrie, whom I did not know but had heard great things about) to join me as a co-editor and we were off and running with our first issue (edited by Julie Owen) in 2015. This series is a theme-based monograph/small book (now morphed into a journal series with Wiley publishers) with 8-10 edited chapters that apply research and scholarship to good practices with useful hands-on advice for practitioners. I loved every minute working on these issues from inviting someone(s) to be theme editors and working with them through the concept development, the process of identifying and mentoring their authors, and editing their first as well as final drafts. Tons of editing! I thought I should really retire in 2023, so I stepped down and love that you (Kathy) moved into the role as senior editor joined by "V" (Vivechkanand Chunoo) as your co-editor. NDSL continues to be an outlet for new authors including practitioners and cutting-edge topics that advance leadership education [www.wileyonlinelibrary.com/journal/ndsl]. It currently is in a journal format instead of the edited chapters that it started out as. I am very proud of it.

***Komives, S. R.***

What are your perspectives on the evolution of thought regarding leadership identity, capacity, and efficacy over the years?

Over the years, what fun it has been to see the concept of leadership be illuminated by the scholarship on so many aspects in its meaning. We have a glorious infinity of adjectives to modify leadership (i.e., __fill in the blank__ leadership) like adaptive, crises, educational, emotionally intelligent, ethical, just, peace, racial/ethnic identity groups like Black or Latinx, servant, spiritual, systemic, transforming, women, and on and on. It has been terrific to see the concept of leadership educator emerge in this century thanks to the work of so many (for example, you [Guthrie], Jenkins, Priest, Seemiller). This community of practice is strong, wise, and visionary.

In addition to leadership styles and behaviors, we now also discuss aspects of leadership such as capacity, identity, efficacy, generativity, power and oppression, and process to name a few. Extensions in this scope have roots in previous thinking and lead us to new perspectives often transformed by more equity and critical, inclusive thinking. I think also of all of David Day's great work distinguishing leader and leadership; and Uhl-bien and Ospino and others emphasizing the difference in entity and relational leadership. It is exciting to see these multi-level approaches to leadership (simplified as the individual, group/team, organization, community/coalitions) that bring the need to view leadership as an interconnected process to the forefront.

The body of scholarship on leader/leadership identity is growing rapidly. I have found great relationships to the work of Wielkiewicz and his colleagues on hierarchical and/or systemic thinking; with Ashford and DeRue's work on identity being granted and/or claimed; Lord and Hall's skill levels of novice to intermediate to expert; along with Dweck's concepts of mindset. Julie Owen's NDSL issue on leader identity development is a great resource on this body of work.

Bandura's work on self-efficacy was a great fit with leadership identity. We must remember that efficacy is domain specific- one can have efficacy for cooking and no efficacy for sports. MSL findings affirmed that even after accounting for numerous other experiences (e.g., training, service, positional leadership), leadership self-efficacy accounted for a substantial significant amount of the variance in leadership behaviors and practices.

What are your suggestions for future research around leadership efficacy?

One given is for sure- there will always be something to research to understand leadership more fully! I will mention just a few.

Collective Efficacy: In addition to self-efficacy, Bandura writes about the concept of collective efficacy and how it is different and distinct from just the amalgamation of individual efficacies. A group of high efficacious leaders can have low group/collective efficacy (imagine a group with one bully and how the group can be toxic and not get anything

accomplished). With the view of leadership as process, everything about groups and their healthy development becomes important for more leadership research including group or collective efficacy.

Group and Collective Contexts: Honestly, we do most of our work on leadership development for individuals. We need to get more serious about teach students how to work well in groups with others. What if we worked with students in new orientation and orientation courses how to do really good group work; then research how they apply and adapt to group assignments in classes. I expect they would emerge with more advanced levels of commitment to leadership as a process in a group and bring that with them to their careers families, and communities.

Beyond efficacy I would also suggest:

International Perspectives: I am encouraged by many scholars studying international perspectives on leadership to crack the western paradigm. Just as the western paradigm needs more critical analysis and reframing to apply what we know about power, oppression, we all can learn from approaches to leadership in other world cultures

Equitable and Just Leadership Practices: The ways power and oppression impact individuals and groups are well known to many who have lived that experience, but for many in the dominant culture who have never had to do the work to challenge their own assumptions and practices it is still hard to fully understand. We need research on ways to raise the awareness of students (much of that research already exists) and bring that research into the redesign of our programs and practices. Our goal must be to advance more equitable and just leadership practices and we need the research to show what those are and how to development them.

Our Book: I hope readers would look also at Julie Owens and my 2023 book (A Research Agenda for Learning and Development Through Higher Education) did with some phenomenal thinkers on research on comprehensive dimensions of leadership education. We examined existing research findings, interrogated those and existing models and practices to recommend a new agenda centered in equity and justice. There is lots of good food for thought in those chapters.

## If you could give one suggestion to early career leadership scholars and practitioners, what would it be?

I echo the always good and predictable recommendation to do the work to know yourself and your own evolving philosophy of leadership. It all starts there. I recommend new leadership scholars and learners develop a process to learning this field. Create a community of practice and advance what we know and do. Early career researchers and practitioners should (1) find the body of work that reflects their passion (is it queer/LGBTQ leadership, leadership for peace or sustainability, servant leadership, international leadership, leadership identity, etc.); (2) dig deep into the scholarship and practice of that topic to know

where and who are doing good work; immerse yourself; reach out to other disciplines; (3) become identified with this passion and develop comfort with you in this aspect of the field doing workshops, convention programs, research, and writing; (4) find your people, particularly other new people and work together on projects taking that aspect of the field to new heights.

## What does leadership development look like in retirement for you?

Finally, in retirement I found that I actually had the time to write more, read more, and go deep in things I was often only able to skim when working fulltime. As a professor, leadership had been my research area, but I had to (and loved doing) my primary work in a student affairs in higher education graduate program. When retired I had the time and fun to really enjoy doing four books, starting the NDSL series, writing lots of forewords and chapters for books as well as consulting and speaking particularly in other countries. I got to travel to Canada, Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan.

I got to do most of these tremendous projects with colleagues and former students – what a joy and an appreciative experience! To see friendly faces on Zoom, or have Wendy Wagner, Matt Sowcik, and you at my house to plan a new book was amazing.

After 10 years of retirement, I figured it was really time to fully retire and move away from professional involvements. My own developmental stages of generativity made it fun to pass along invitations for any involvement to others knowing they knew more contemporary work than I did, and it was no longer my time. I will always be a learner and feel like a new learner as I explore more of the critical theory work in our field. It is a warm feeling to look back on my first professional involvement with the scholarship of leadership 55 years ago and see the emergence and evolution of the field of leadership education knowing I got to be part of it alongside so many wonderful people. The future is strong.

### To learn more about Susan R. Komives, check out:

Scarpino, P. (2023) *Leadership profile: Susan R. Komives.* Oral history project. Tobias Leadership Center. Indiana University. https://tobiascenter.iu.edu/leadership-insights/leadership-in-action/leadership-profiles/komives-susan.html

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***Interview***

Some additional reading from Susan R. Komives include:


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Select leadership books and monographs by Susan R. Komives:


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