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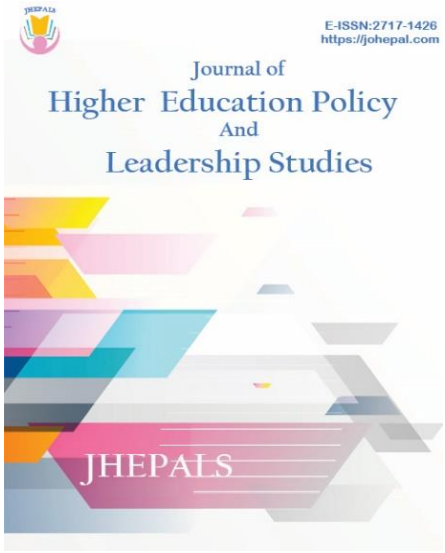
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"The Curtain Was Pulled Back:" Building Leadership Capacity in Higher Education

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"The Curtain Was Pulled Back:" Building Leadership Capacity in Higher Education

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Abstract

Unprecedented scrutiny of top university leadership has led to renewed calls for more effective management and leadership of higher education institutions. Despite promising evidence about the positive impact of early career management and leadership development programs in other sectors, little is known about their potential impact for institutions of higher education. Accordingly, we sought to evaluate the experience of participants and preceptors in a novel early-career administrative fellowship program for management and leadership development in higher education. We employed qualitative methods using open-ended, in-depth interviews with former fellows (n=18) and their preceptors (n=12) until we reached theoretical saturation; data were analyzed using the constant comparative method of qualitative data analysis. Five recurrent themes emerged from the fellows: 1) skill and capacity development, 2) changing sense of self, 3) insights about institutional life, 4) having impact, and 5) mechanisms of change. Three themes emerged from preceptors: 1) preceptor skill and capacity development, 2) fellows' value for the existing work flow, and 3) fellows' influence on longer-term institutional changes. The findings suggest a feasible and cost-effective approach to building institutional management and leadership capacity, particularly as we documented extensive growth not only of the fellows but also their preceptors.

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Introduction

In recent years, concerns about the value of higher education in the United States have intensified (Hope, 2018; Ladany, 2024; Tough, 2024). Colleges and universities that were once considered reliable pillars of U.S. communities and beacons of opportunity are under fire (Tough, 2024). Detractors point to increasing tuition, the failure of curricula to adapt to the evolving job market, and lack of transparency concerning admissions and leadership decision making (Ladany, 2024). Some argue that baccalaureate degrees are not worth the cost, as the value of an advanced degree has declined significantly in recent decades (Bowen, 2018). Public trust in higher education is on the decline, and concerns once voiced by a minority are now gaining support from the general public. At the same time, unprecedented scrutiny of university top leadership has resulted in successive, high-profile resignations from major institutions of higher education including Northwestern University, University of New Mexico, Harvard and University of Pennsylvania presidents, respectively. The situation has given rise to renewed calls for more effective management and leadership of higher education institutions. Nevertheless, despite this clear need, relatively little attention has been paid to establishing a pipeline of management and leadership talent in higher education.

Management and leadership development programs to build a pipeline of leadership talent are commonplace in sectors such as pharmaceuticals, banking, and health care (Cherlin et al., 2006; Helfand et al., 2005; Ravaghi et al., 2020); however, such programs have been less prominent in higher education. Pharmaceutical companies such as Pfizer and Novo Nordisk offer early career training programs that introduce young professionals to the industry and equip early careerists with opportunities to develop leadership capacity over time (Prevel Katsanis, 2006). Similarly, early-career training programs also exist in the banking industry, such as Commerce Bank's Bank Operations Leadership Exploration and Development (LEAD) program and the Wells Fargo Commercial Banking Early Career Development Program (Wells Fargo, 2025), each designed to promote management and leadership development among talented young professionals through hands-on experience in the field.

Several peer-reviewed studies and a systematic review from the health care industry (Helfand et al., 2005; Robbins, 2021; Smith, 2022; Cherlin et al., 2006; Ravaghi et al., 2021) have examined the impact of such management training programs. Observational studies (Helfand et al., 2005; Smith, 2022; Cherlin et al., 2006) have documented significant improvements in participants' management competencies such as communication, collaboration, and problem solving, although some data suggest the magnitude of the effects has been modest and depend on self versus preceptor reports (Cherlin et al., 2006). The systematic review (Ravaghi et al., 2021), which evaluated nine quasi-experimental studies of hospital management training programs, concluded that such programs positively influenced technical, interpersonal, and conceptual competencies of program participants.

The literature also suggests that the benefits of early career management and leadership development programs can extend beyond the benefits to the participants and can generate positive impacts for the sponsoring organization as well. For instance, the systematic review (Ravaghi et al., 2021) documented improved internal promotion pipelines after implementing management training programs. Similarly, a mixed methods study

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(Robbins et al., 2021) collected responses from 48 healthcare organizations that had offered administrative fellowships and found that executives from these sponsoring organizations believed the fellowship program had helped develop talent more broadly in the institution and supported organizational priorities. Findings suggested that administrative fellowship programs brought 'fresh ideas' to the organizations and enhanced the recruitment and retention of diverse candidates, thereby bolstering the strength and diversity of leadership within the organization overall (Robbins et al., 2021)--so much so that even during the COVID-19 pandemic, they did not eliminate the programs.

Despite this promising evidence on the positive impact of management and leadership development programs at both the individual and institutional levels, little is known about their potential impact for institutions of higher education. Although formal leadership curricula does exist in professional education, few explicitly teach leadership theory itself (Fennell et al., 2025). Accordingly, we sought to evaluate the experience of participants and their preceptors in a novel management and leadership development program (called an administrative fellowship) for early career professionals in higher education management. We employed a qualitative methodology using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) as previous studies of this intervention have not been conducted, and we wished to be as open-ended as possible in understanding participants' and preceptors' experiences. We conducted additional interviews until the point of theoretical saturation, i.e., when successive interviews generated no new themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and we analyzed the data using the constant comparative method of qualitative data analysis (Patton, 1990). Findings from our study may be useful to policymakers and institutional leadership seeking methods of strengthening management practices in higher education and providing needed pathways for building effective leadership.

Conceptual Framework

Although we chose to conduct a qualitative study because of a lack of prior work examining fellows and preceptors in management and leadership development programs in higher education, we benefited from a conceptual framework building off existing literature in the area of institutional management and leadership learning (Chunoo, 2025; Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018). We selected Chunoo's work on ethical leadership as it seemed most germane to these functions in higher education–a field devoted to the public good and revered for its contribution to social mobility. Chunoo examines how three domains, previously identified by Jones et al. (2016), may support ethical leadership. The three are also consistent with Shams et al. (2025) concepts of leader identity, leader self-awareness, and leader self-efficacy. The first domain, regarding identity, refers to how one perceives oneself and their relationship to the workplace, as described also by Eubanks et al. (2012). The second domain focuses on awareness of one's capacity, or the possession of skills, knowledge, and sensitivity to others needed to be effective in one's work role, discussed at length in Begley (2006). The third domain, self-efficacy, is the degree to which one can execute work in a way that has a positive impact, as Luthans and Youssef (2007) articulate.

Previous conceptual work has focused on these developmental domains–identity, capacity, and self-efficacy–as features of individuals, and we sought to add to this research by positing that these developmental domains may be applicable for hiring departments,

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not just individual fellows. We thus anticipated that a precepting department's participation in the administrative fellowship may influence the department's identity, its capacity to execute work, and its potential for positive impact. Some of these effects on preceptors may lead to greater use of adaptive leadership (Heifetz et al., 2009), reflective practices that can build resilience (Guthrie et al., 2021), and subsequent transformative leadership behavior (Shams et al., 2025).

Research Methodology

Setting

We conducted this study at a residential liberal arts college in Poughkeepsie, New York, with a student body of about 2,600 full-time students. Founded in 1861, the college has a long-standing commitment to fostering intellectual curiosity and critical thinking in which students are encouraged to ask questions and participate in the shared governance of the institution as part of their four-year undergraduate education. The liberal arts curriculum encourages students to develop unique perspectives and critical skills, and small classroom sizes and a residential campus accentuate the focus on a learning community. The college implemented an administrative fellowship program in 2018, which selected 5-7 young professionals in a paid, year-long, cohort-based program designed to expose recent graduates to a variety of roles and projects within the institution's administration. Each participant, called a fellow, was matched with an administrative department and a preceptor who committed to host the fellow for a year (e.g., student affairs, facilities operations, advancement). Once selected, the cohort of fellows completed a day-long orientation/kick-off event with their peers and their supervisors, and alongside their assigned departmental duties, they participated in monthly cohort-based check-ins and professional development sessions related to broader management issues in higher education (e.g., shared governance models, endowment management, communications in nonprofit settings, alumni relations), with the overall goal of providing an entry-level pathway for people aspiring toward management careers in higher education.

Study Design and Sampling

This was a semi-structured qualitative study, which utilized a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) with in-depth interviews. We selected a qualitative study design because of the novelty of the program and lack of existing literature on its effect, as well as our research objective, which included documenting fellows' and preceptors' experiences in rich detail, as is best achieved through qualitative methods (Curry et al., 2009; Patton, 1990). As recommended in purposive sampling for qualitative research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990), we identified characteristics that might influence fellows' experiences including gender, years since completing the program, and department hosting the Fellow. We randomized the list of fellows (n=35) and preceptors (n=19) who had completed the program since its inception in 2019 and invited participation in random order. After obtaining informed consent, participants were interviewed online using an open-ended discussion guide designed to explore their experiences as a preceptor in the program and its impact on their department or the institution. Additional participants were interviewed until we reached theoretical saturation, i.e., when successive interviews

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provided no new concepts (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Dworkin, 2012). This occurred after 18 completed fellow interviews (from 35 eligible fellows, 26 former fellows were invited, 20 responded, and of those, 18 participated, yielding a response rate of 18/26 or 69%) and 12 preceptor interviews (from 19 eligible preceptors, 13 were invited to participate and of those, 12 participated yielding a response rate of 92%). At the time of the interview, most were employed in non-profit and management-related positions and about 10% were in graduate school. The preceptors represented 10 different departments; two third were women and all but one were still employed at the College and engaged with the Administrative Fellowship program. Participants (Table 1) were assured their participation was voluntary and confidential, and data were anonymized during transcription. All research procedures were reviewed and approved by the Vassar Institutional Review Board.

Table 1.
Demographic Characteristic of Participants (N=18 fellows and 13 preceptors)

Demographic Characteristics			
Fellow Demographics		**n**	**%**
Gender	Men	7	44.5%
	Women	9	50%
	Nonbinary	2	11.1%
Age			
	Younger than 25 years	2	11.1%
	Between 25 and 30 years	14	77.8%
	Older than 30 years	2	11.1%
International	Yes	3	16.7%
	No	15	83.3%
Race (US citizens)	Asian American	2	13.3%
	Black or African American	2	13.3%
	White	6	40%
	Other/Multiracial	4	26.6%
	Prefer not to say	1	6.6%
Ethnicity (US citizens)	Hispanic or Latine	5	33.3%
	Not Hispanic or Latine	10	66.6%
Preceptor Demographics		**n**	**%**
Gender	Men	4	33.3%
	Women	8	66.7%
Race (US Citizens)	Asian American	0	0%
	Black or African American	1	8.3%
	White	9	75%
	Other/Multiracial	2	16.6%
	Prefer not to say	0	0%

Data Collection

One member of the research team (WED) randomized and purposefully selected fellows and preceptors to send them a preliminary email explaining the research objectives and protocol and requesting their participation. Interviewers (COS, ME, AC) then contacted each participant (including fellows and preceptors) to ask them to participate. After providing written informed consent, participants (both fellows and preceptors) were interviewed remotely using a discussion guide (Online Supplementar File) consisting of several open-

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ended, *grand tour* questions (McCracken, 1988) used to explore participants' fellows' and preceptors' experiences with the program and its influence on their subsequent career for fellows or on the institutional department for preceptors. Interviews lasted an average of 41 minutes and were audio recorded with consent. We used Rev, an artificial intelligence transcription software, to assist with transcriptions, and we completed accuracy checks for each file against its audio recording before beginning data analysis. The researchers who did not have prior affiliations with the program completed audio checks and anonymized the data during transcription so as to limit bias. Beyond assisting with the initial contacting of participants, the researchers who were connected with the program did not participate in the interview process. Participants were presented with a summary of the findings and descriptive themes after data collection to ensure the accuracy of the data. Member checking as recommended by qualitative researchers (Creswell & Poth, 2013; Dezin & Lincoln, 2011) was conducted to enhance the validity and credibility of the findings. Feedback was used to further understand the data and minimize misinterpretation by the research team.

Data Analysis

We used the constant comparative method of qualitative data analysis (Patton, 1990; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to characterize recurrent themes in the data. After reading interview transcripts independently, the researchers (EHB, WED, COS, ME, AC) developed an inductive code sheet that identified concepts expressed by participants. We assigned codes to chunks of data, and continued to review transcripts, tracked concepts as they emerged, and the meaning of the codes throughout the duration of the data collection process. The team met biweekly to discuss themes, patterns, and quotations and to constantly include new codes and expand or narrow the meaning of codes in accordance with thematic analysis and qualitative data analysis (Curry et al., 2009; Lanfer & Reifegerste, 2021). Throughout data collection, the research team met regularly to explore disconfirming evidence to limit potential bias. We maintained an audit trail throughout data analysis to record conceptual adjustments and decision-making, and we re-coded each transcript after we arrived at a final code sheet. As recommended by experts in qualitative analysis (Curry et al., 2009; Patton, 2002; Malterud, 2001; Mays & Pope, 1995) rigorous qualitative methods were utilized to bolster the trustworthiness of our data including the use of a consistent discussion guide, a team of multiple interviewers and coders with various backgrounds and perspectives, audiotaping interviews and quality checking of transcripts, a process of negotiated consensus to resolve coding disagreements, and the documentation of analytical decisions using an audit trail.

Reflexivity

The research team included the college president (EHB), a member of the college senior leadership team (WED), two alumni of Vassar College (ME, AC), and an external researcher (COS). The alumni and external researcher had no affiliation with the administrative fellowship program, while the other two researchers (EHB, WED) have worked closely with the program and its fellows. Only the researchers who were not affiliated with the program conducted interviews, and participant data was anonymized during transcription in order to mitigate bias. We acknowledge the potential for the researchers' connection to Vassar to

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create bias, and we participated in consistent individual and group reflection about potential blind spots throughout the study.

Results

Themes regarding Fellows' experiences

Five recurrent themes emerged from the 18 fellows' interviews: 1) skill and capacity development, 2) changing sense of self, 3) insights about institutional life, 4) having impact, and 5) mechanisms of change (Table 2). Below we describe each of these in greater depth, using verbatim quotations to illustrate the theme in fellows' own words. Disconfirming cases are discussed as apparent in the data.

Table 2.
Recurrent Themes on Fellows' Experiences

Fellows' experiences	
Theme	**Illustrative Quote**
Skill and capacity development	*Learning how to manage people, even if was on a small scale..learning the basics of how to see what other people are doing, how to delegate tasks, how to teach someone how to do something…The management experience is something I take with me–it was the first time I'd ever been responsible for anyone else in a professional scenario.* (ID #4)
Growing sense of self	*[The fellowship] really taught me [what] I am capable of. A big [part] of the program is doing visible, high-impact things. It gave me the confidence to take on those projects, claim those projects, insert myself into those conversations, and understand my capacity to do that. Before, I was less sure I was capable of doing institutional transformation projects. So it definitely helped on that confidence level for me.* (ID #1)
Insights about institutional life	*It opened my eyes toward how a college runs outside of being a student. I got to see what the administrator keeps in mind, the way priorities are, how things flow from start to end…during COVID, there was a clear disconnection of the students and administration…working in administration helped me understand maybe why there was this type of disconnection and make it a little better.* (ID #16)
Having impact	*In a nutshell…as a young Black woman in a department of almost fully white people…I was able to positively impact that space and represent a different category of people interested in innovation and entrepreneurship. For me to be in that position, it helped other young women to come to the department.* (ID #20)
Mechanisms of change	*[My supervisor] asked me to get something in by x date, and I didn't get it to him until the next day. In our check-in, he said "If you're not going to get something to me on time, it's okay, but you have to tell me." I had just avoided it…and that was definitely a moment and something I [still] think about. Whenever there is something at work that I'm not quite going to get done, I send an email and think back to that moment with my [fellowship supervisor].* (ID #15)

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Building Leadership Capacity in HE

Theme #1: Skill and Capacity Development

Participants, as former administrative fellows across a range of departmental contexts, reflected on a set of newly acquired professional skills, which they attributed to the fellowship experience. These skills included project management, delegating tasks, running meetings, teaching others how to accomplish a task, and managing people as well as more personal capacities such as how to speak professionally, how to network, and how to present oneself in the workplace. As one participant who had worked in career development illustrated,

> Learning how to manage people, even if was on a small scale..learning the basics of how to see what other people are doing, how to delegate tasks, how to teach someone how to do something…The management experience is something I take with me–it was the first time I'd ever been responsible for anyone else in a professional scenario. (ID #4)

On a more personal level, participants reflected on how the fellowship shaped their self-expression and engagement at work in ways that carry into their current employment settings. A former fellow who was a current city planner at the time of the study highlighted this personal style development:

> The fellowship pushed me out of my shell. I had to talk to random people, interview random people, set up my own projects. Now working, I know there is a certain image the city wants to give [and so] there is a certain way I need to dress, that I need to speak if I'm just sending a text message to be professional. And I feel like those kinds of practices began when I was a fellow. (ID #16)

While participants reflected consistently on the extensive learnings of their year as an administrative fellow, disconfirming evidence emerged as well with some participants indicating that the one year program length was not long enough to learn as much as possible and expressed a desire for the fellowship to be extended to be two years.

Theme #2: Growing Sense of Self

Prominent in the interviews were the concepts of self-confidence, identity shifts, and gaining clarity on longer-term professional goals. Together, these areas of growth contributed to a more defined sense of self for administrative fellows. Confidence came from a range of experiences including being thrown into high impact projects, having to independently problem solve, presenting publicly in high stakes situations, and being corrected or given "guardrails" as one participant described. For instance, a participant who had developed and implemented the first innovation hackathon as part of his fellowship reflected on this experience as follows,

> [The fellowship] really taught me [what] I am capable of. A big [part] of the program is doing visible, high-impact things. It gave me the confidence to take on those projects, claim those projects, insert myself into those conversations, and understand my capacity to do that. Before, I was less sure I was capable of doing institutional transformation projects. So it definitely helped on that confidence level for me. (ID #1)

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Another participant described the freedom the fellowship afforded her to take on previously unchartered projects with "soft guardrails" contributed to her level of confidence. She related,

> [I experienced] that sense of confidence–just knowing my ability to get stuff done, to figure it out, that no matter what the problem is or no matter what the very complicated issue is, I'll always figure it out. It might take longer, it might take shorter, but I'll always find a way. I was presented with this problem and given soft guardrails–and then created the whole thing. It really instilled in me that I can do anything I set my mind to. (ID #3)

Also important in the fellows' development during their post-graduate year was the identity shift from being a student to becoming an administrator. This transition was notable for some who, as progressively-minded students, had previously been critical of institutional strategies and actions–and now found themselves fully participating in institutional initiatives as an administrator. Others reflected on discomfort with suddenly having what felt like unearned credibility among students, who had been peers just a year before, as one participant described:

> I realized I needed to make that shift because now that I was in an administrative role, there was a different power dynamic that I have with students; they take my advice a lot more to heart. So how do I soften what I saw and keep them as the decision making and me as the support as opposed to them just nodding and doing what I tell them to. That was a big learning curve for me. (ID #1)

Gaining clarity on longer-term professional and life goals was also an experience former fellows described in rich detail. Participants reflected on how they learned that the education sector was the right place for them, and others grew to feel quite differently and pursued management-related jobs outside academics. Regardless, greater clarity was commonplace, and highlighted as a positive outcome for participants, who generally felt ready for the next professional step and, across varying cohorts, attributed their subsequent success to experiences in their fellowship year. As one reported,

> Through the conversations [during the fellowship] I was much more grounded in myself and knowing what I wanted and knowing what sort of skills I possessed. [It taught] me what I was capable of and what possibilities are out there. I came out feeling motivated to seek out new opportunities and relationships with other professionals. (ID #2)

Theme #3: Insights about Institutional Life

Participants described being surprised by and appreciative of learnings regarding institutional realities. For one, the complexity of the institution, the many moving parts requiring coordination to effect even simple events, was noted as unexpected. Additionally, participants reflected on hierarchies and power dynamics they saw from new vantage points, and they had a more comprehensive understanding of financial considerations in educational programming.

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Building Leadership Capacity in HE

In terms of complexity, participants described being exposed to the inner workings of the college, as one person put it "*The curtain was pulled back.*" (ID #14). From participants whose fellowship roles had been videographers to sustainability coordinators to affinity space events planners–the common insight was *"how much work it takes to make an institution run*" (ID 24). As participants illustrated:

> It opened my eyes toward how a college runs outside of being a student. I got to see what the administrator keeps in mind, the way priorities are, how things flow from start to end…during COVID, there was a clear disconnection of the students and administration…working in administration helped me understand maybe why there was this type of disconnection and make it a little better. (ID #16)

> And it was really eye-opening to be in the background and try and accomplish some of those goals, but also face the day-to-day barriers and see the nitty gritty of, okay, some of this stuff takes time, and we're also not miracle workers. We do have to operate within the confines of the bureaucratic red tape, so to speak, and it is difficult to navigate. So hindsight is 2020, but we did what we could, and I think that was the biggest lesson is there's so much more behind the scenes efforts that go in that students don't necessarily see. (ID #23)

Participants also noted that they witnessed power dynamics and the effects of organizational hierarchy in ways that surprised them. In particular, whereas fellows, who had as students envisioned administrators at the top of the institutional hierarchy, had not anticipated the faculty-administrator power dynamics that existed. Once the fellows became identified themselves as administrators, they recognized this aspect of institutional life, as one described:

> Hearing the plight of administrators was something that I wasn't expecting where I would hear about instances where they felt silenced or ways in which they felt lesser than faculty, for example. (ID #14)

As a key part of institutional life, participants highlighted how they learned about financial pressures and constraints in ways that felt new to them. This understanding came with a more mature appreciation for long-term financial sustainability and how tradeoffs are made for longer-term goals to be accomplished. For example, one participant reflected on her changing views through the fellowship as follows,

> I learned a ton about how money works on the institutional nonprofit side of things. As I've continued in my adult life, I have tried to spread the gospel, so to speak, about how important it is to give back, even if it's literally $5. A lot of students have these ideas that the school has this billion dollar endowment and that they're just hemorrhaging money. But the way [the institution] raises money is very well thought out, and it was really interesting to learn. (ID #17)

Last, participants described a humanization of administrators that occurred for them over time. What was once viewed as a monolithic group, "the admin," became known as a

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set of people, with names and unique interests and experiences. Appreciation for the care and professionalism of administrators as human beings was a recurrent theme. As one participant said,

> I learned that people in leadership positions are also people. Sometimes we like to minimize people whenever our needs or priorities or asks are not met…I was able to see the human side of the people in the administration…how they did care about the students. I was surprised by how much thought and care went into the structure of the institution, that processes are handled professionally and done out of care by administrators. (ID #20)

Theme #4: Having Impact

An uplifting aspect of the participants' many reflections on their time as fellows was their belief that they made a positive impact and had created meaning. These positive impacts included starting new programs that continued after the fellowship (e.g., new dining ideas, student entrepreneurship programs), establishing new protocols for old routines (e.g., digital fundraising, less siloed event planning), and expanding the culture to be more diverse and inclusive. As participants illustrated this latter impact,

> In a nutshell…as a young Black woman in a department of almost fully white people…I was able to positively impact that space and represent a different category of people interested in innovation and entrepreneurship. For me to be in that position, it helped other young women to come to the department. (ID #20)

> [The college] did not have international voices represented in the [health and wellness staff.] I thought as an outsider [from China] I felt like it was important to have someone like me share my perspective. And [my supervisor] later told me it was so great to have my perspective. One of the highlights was being invited to take part in decision making in the department. (ID #19)

> During orientation week, I saw a Muslim student and she was wearing a hijab like I do. We made eye contact with each other and she came up to me [and said] "I'm so happy to see another hijabi here. I really am glad to see you." I was not expecting that at all, but that really made me feel good…It really makes a difference to see somebody who looks like you. (ID #25)

Theme #5: Mechanisms of Change

In addition to the many impacts participants discussed, they also outlined what they viewed as the mechanisms by which these impacts, and particularly growth moments, came into being. In addition to being given meaningful assignments so as to develop new work skills, participants identified two mechanisms of the program that were integral to their experience: the relationships with their supervisors and the cohort experience with peers.

Participants highlighted the supervisor as paramount to their learning. Supervisory actions that helped included keeping open communication, checking in on the fellow regularly through one-on-one meetings and less formal check-ins as well, inviting fellows to join professional development opportunities, and advocating for fellows in terms of space,

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responsibilities, and benefits. Additionally, participants appreciated "tough love" moments when a supervisor made clear what had been unacceptable or suboptimal in the fellows' work. For example, reflecting on a supervisor interaction after missing a deadline, one participant explained:

> [My supervisor] asked me to get something in by x date, and I didn't get it to him until the next day. In our check-in, he said "If you're not going to get something to me on time, it's okay, but you have to tell me." I had just avoided it…and that was definitely a moment and something I [still] think about. Whenever there is something at work that I'm not quite going to get done, I send an email and think back to that moment with my [fellowship supervisor]. (ID #15)

Part of the fellowship design was having a cohort, assigned to varying departments and roles, who met with the fellowship director monthly for professional development and reflection sessions and also functioned as a set of peers. This cohort model emerged as influential on fellows' experience in largely, but not solely, positive ways. The cohort was described as providing emotional support, reducing loneliness in the first year of professional, full-time work, and being a source of information for each other–about housing, benefits, and various support systems. As one participant related,

> I loved my cohort. There were training sessions [even on how to do our taxes]. I remember we would just talk to each other…so we got pretty close. We were struggling with housing [given] our pay. And then one of our fellows was getting married. So we had a great time just being able to speak to each other and it helped we were in the same spot. (ID #24)

Although fellows experienced the positive accompaniment of having a cohort, disconfirming evidence also was present in that some participants noted the cohort experience was disappointing–particularly during COVID when meetings were online or because the group did not gel effectively. As one participant said,

> I honestly think the cohort model was maybe not as strong as it could have been, and I'm not entirely sure what would make it stronger and what would work because I think it depends on who is part of that year's cohort for those people individually and collectively. (ID #11)

Themes Regarding Preceptors' Experience

Three themes were prominent in the interviews with preceptors: 1) preceptor skill and capacity development, 2) the perceived value of having a fellow for the existing work flow, 3) longer-term institutional changes (work flow and culture) associated with the fellows' time in the department (Table 3). Again, disconfirming experience is presented as it emerged.

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Table 3.
Recurrent Themes on Preceptors' Experiences

Preceptors' experiences	
Theme	Illustrative Quote
Preceptor skill and capacity development	*My initial instinct with people I work with is to be friends with them. Having an administrative fellow that I supervised made me realize that there's a line that needs to be drawn… you can't be friends necessarily while you're in this kind of supervising position. You can be a mentor and you can be friendly, but it's important to know where that line is between friends and coworkers. (ID #71)*
Perceived value of having a fellow for existing work flow	*An administrative fellow is uniquely suited to doing the work because they've so recently graduated that they understand the student experience deeply, and they are able to help us shape the programming around the entrepreneurship program in a way that another employee might not have that perspective. (ID #80)*
Longer-term institutional changes	*And those meetings [between three departments all partly responsible for sustainability efforts] have persisted even [after] the administrative fellow… we continue to meet on a regular basis, which really helps with communication between our three areas. [We also] continue to put out a monthly newsletter that talks about what all three areas are doing, and what the preserve is doing in each month. And I think that's helpful. And [the fellow made[] a social media page for all three areas, and we still continue to do that. (ID #71)*

Theme #1: Preceptor Skill and Capacity Development

Preceptors from various departments emphasized the professional growth they experienced while navigating supervisory relationships with administrative fellows. Even preceptors with many years of supervisory experience prior to working with the fellows noted that the fellowship experience enhanced their effectiveness as supervisors and mentors. Participants reflected on how they learned to adapt their existing skills to better meet the needs of these early career professionals, including establishing clearer boundaries. As one participant noted,

> My initial instinct with people I work with is to be friends with them. Having an administrative fellow that I supervised made me realize that there's a line that needs to be drawn… you can't be friends necessarily while you're in this kind of supervising position. You can be a mentor and you can be friendly, but it's important to know where that line is between friends and coworkers. (ID #71)

Participants also shared how the fellowship experience broadened their perspectives and influenced their approach to work. As this participant explained, collaborating with the administrative fellow improved their communication across various audiences and allowed them to better understand the needs of students.

> What I learned as a supervisor was just a lot more information than I even had…Because there were key moments during the year where I remember [the

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> fellow] saying very explicitly oh, that doesn't make sense, or that's not going to make sense unless you're able to answer A, B & C…it taught me a lot about how one communicates to different groups. (ID #79)

Additionally, preceptors described learning to balance the fellow's growth with their completion of tasks. While supervising early career professionals was recognized as a generally positive experience by preceptors, they also encountered challenges when employees struggled to transition from functioning as a student to behaving like a full-time professional and when fellows prioritized personal matters over their work during business hours. Supervising a fellow resulted in shifts in the supervisor's approaches that were then applied more generally to working with early career employees, as one participant described,

> Supervising the administrative fellow was a challenging experience, so it did definitely lead to some growth there and reflection on how to balance supporting the growth of a new team member while also balancing the need for the work to be accomplished… it was a continuously reflective process and…I learned a lot and it has influenced how I approach any new supervisor-supervisee relationship to make sure that there are clear shared expectations from the very onset. (ID #75)

Theme #2: Perceived Value of Having a Fellow for Existing Work Flow

Preceptors highlighted how they integrated the administrative fellows into the everyday work flow, expanding the capabilities of the department. Preceptors observed that part of the value of a fellow came from their understanding of the student perspective. Fellows provided a point of view that other administrators did not have, as described by this preceptor:

> An administrative fellow is uniquely suited to doing the work because they've so recently graduated that they understand the student experience deeply, and they are able to help us shape the programming around the entrepreneurship program in a way that another employee might not have that perspective. (ID #80)

Preceptors also recognized how a fellow's presence helped to strengthen and develop specific programs. The role was of such significance that some fellows were transitioned to full-time positions in the department. As a preceptor explained, the fellowship program helped address an ongoing staffing challenge by creating an employment channel.

> We were able to create the role that managed the student caller program, which was a program that helped us educate the student body about philanthropy.. It became sort of the lifeblood of our organization and the annual giving organization. [The fellowship program] became a feeder program for me, which was really crucial because annual giving is a program that has a lot of challenges around retaining people. (ID #76)

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Theme #3: Longer-Term Institutional Changes

Beyond the day-to-day workflow improvements attributed to fellows, preceptors noted the fellows also added to longer-term institutional change by improving cross-campus connections and developing new programs that subsequently became part of department's routine activities. Improved communication across departments emerged from fellows' efforts to create more regular interdepartmental meetings, joint projects, and shared communication tools such as newsletters. As one preceptor described, while the administrative fellow served as a catalyst for such efforts, standing meetings and improved communication through a newsletter persisted beyond the fellow's term.

> And those meetings [between three departments all partly responsible for sustainability efforts] have persisted even [after] the administrative fellow… we continue to meet on a regular basis, which really helps with communication between our three areas. [We also] continue to put out a monthly newsletter that talks about what all three areas are doing, and what the preserve is doing in each month. And I think that's helpful. And [the fellow made] a social media page for all three areas, and we still continue to do that. (ID #71)

New programming included events and approaches that preceptors noted had made sustained, institution-wide improvements. For example, one preceptor noted changes seen in dining based on the administrative fellow's work, which sustained for years after the fellow left, saying:

> I think particularly you can see the lasting effect in dining. Our celebration for the new year, Black History Month, women's history month, pride month, all of those components are part of what the administrative fellow brought. Giving students the ability to submit a recipe, the biweekly [dining] email, and the way we communicate and…interact with students [now] has to do with the standard the administrative fellow created, and then we continued it because it was effective and efficient. (ID #74)

Preceptors also reported examples of the administrative fellows positively influencing relationships between departments that had previously been unproductive and, in some cases, disrespectful. For example, a preceptor described a workshop involving race and pluralism that their fellow developed to address student concerns, and through this, established long-lasting, positive relationships with other administrative and academic departments. The preceptor described that the administrative fellow's work set the stage for sustained positive relationships across the previously distant departments:

> We worked together to design a workshop that has now become a staple. And the director of the other department, and some of the members of their staff are now more, I would say, supportive. They're coming into student growth and engagement. They're interacting with our departments more. That never happened before. So these are some of the things that really came out of the foundational work of the administrative fellow. (ID #82)

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Conclusion & Discussion

We found that the experience of being an administrative fellow was generally positive for participants. They described a wide range of new skills and capacities—from technical expertise on how a variety of college systems worked to practical tasks such as creating events, writing effective emails, and managing one's time. Additionally, they also reported an expanding sense of self and fulfillment as they recognized they had made a meaningful, positive impact on the institution and its community. As similarly found in Aniche et al. (2025), participants described a growing confidence in their work, as well as in asking for help and being comfortable in discomfort. Participants also reflected deeply on a set of institutional insights, which generally involved having more tolerance for the complexity of organizational life and greater empathy for people who manage and lead institutions. In terms of findings related to preceptors' experience, we found preceptors, too, reflected on newfound skills and capacities as they adapted to supervising early careerists. While some reported that the task of supervising fellows was difficult and not always successful, preceptors also shared how fellows markedly improved existing work flows between departments and, in several cases, were the genesis for lasting institutional improvements.

As anticipated, our empirical findings were aligned with conceptual literature (Joneset al., 2016; Guthrie & Jenkins; 2018; Chunoo, 2025; Shams et al., 2025) that has suggested attainment of skills and knowledge, shaping identity relative to the work setting, and developing a sense of efficacy are central to leadership development. In addition, however, we documented another domain as prominent in participants' experience: developing institutional insight. During the course of their program, participants developed an appreciation for the complexity of organizational life such as is typically understood by management and leadership higher in the organizational hierarchy. These insights included having a more nuanced understanding of resource allocation, an understanding of and appreciation for organizational politics, empathy for colleagues in leadership roles who have to make difficult decisions, and increased patience regarding the pace of change. Curiously, ushering the fellows into the beginning of their professional lives in the same environment in which they "grew up" as students provided contrasts that intrigued fellows and enhanced their perspectives in ways characteristic of more senior-level managers. The interactions resulted in increased trust in and affinity for the institution on the part of the fellows, particularly important in these days of waning institutional trust. Furthermore, preceptors, inspired by cross-departmental work of fellows–also developed greater understanding and appreciation for the larger institution, beyond their units, which was described as adding to longer-term coordination and institutional improvements.

The implications of these results are several. For leadership of institutions of higher education, our findings suggest a feasible and cost effective approach to building institutional management and leadership capacity, particularly as we documented extensive growth not only of the fellows but also their preceptors. The administrative fellowship model we evaluated aligns with Aniche et al. (2025) recommendation for longer-term, cohort-based engagement including structured content and independent, applied work. For policy makers and researchers seeking strategies for restoring trust in higher education, such entry-level management development programming can influence entry-level employees' perspectives on institutions, witnessing their complexity and appreciating their humanity–

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rather than seeing institutions as impermeable, monolithic entities. Last, for institutional innovators, the study demonstrated a structural and adaptive mechanism by which new ideas were introduced, tested, refined, and adopted for improving department performance and interdepartmental coordination. Further research on how these results may be replicated or influenced by organizational context among a broader set of institutions and management training programs is warranted.

Our results should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, the study was conducted at a single institution that had made a commitment to early careerist management training and development. The institution had ample institutional support and resources; thus results may differ in other institutions. Second, the qualitative method we used limits our ability to make claims of causality; however, we applied state-of-the-art methods recommended by experts in qualitative methods (Creswell & Poth, 2013; Curry et al., 2009; Patton, 2002; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to enhance trustworthiness of our findings, including employing a standardized discussion guide, using a team with diverse backgrounds to interview as well as interpret the data, audiotaping the interviews and quality-assuring the accuracy of the transcription, consistent use of a coding scheme and use of negotiated consensus to resolve disagreements, explicit investigation for disconfirming evidence, ensuring theoretical saturation was reached, and member-checking to review participants' perspectives on the comprehensiveness and accuracy of the recurrent themes. Last, although we had extensive data on the perspectives of both the administrative fellows and their supervisors, we lacked data to validate their perspectives against operational data, and we did not fully triangulate to assess co-workers' views on the impact of fellows or the program overall. Nevertheless, as a first study of an entry-level fellowship in higher education management, the findings can be useful to prompt further research with additional training programs and longer-term follow up times.

Despite these limitations, this research has described the important experience of young adults transitioning from student to professional roles in higher education. The maturation process as well the mechanisms by which that growth occurred show that investment in early career management development programs can pay substantial benefits not just to the participants themselves but also to their supervisors, who honed their own management and communication skills through the precepting experience and to the broader institution. In this study, fellows grew in their understanding, trust, and humanization of higher education administration and the institution experienced improvement in interdepartmental exchanges and sustained innovative programming. Overall, the administrative fellowship was found to be a practical and effective way to enhance management, leadership, and institutional capacity in higher education.

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This study involved human participants and was approved by the Vassar College Institutional Review Board. All participants provided written informed consent prior to their involvement. Participant anonymity and confidentiality were ensured throughout the study, adhering to the principles of the Common Rule (45 CFR 46).

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This paper reflects the original work of the authors and has not been previously published in any form. The data are available upon request.

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